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**Practitioner Involvement in Experiential Online  
Learning in Higher Business Education:  
A Case Study**

**Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the  
University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor of Education  
by Stefan Albert Leuenberger**

**October 31, 2016**

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**Acknowledgements**

Thanks are due to my family, particularly to Sahin for the ongoing support, patience, motivation and sacrifices during my doctoral studies. Without your care, I would not have made it.

Thanks to my former colleagues for their assistance during my thesis research and all the other participants who contributed.

Thanks to my supervisors Lucilla Crosta and Janet Strivens for their valuable feedback and ongoing encouragement during the thesis stage and to Ian Willis and Kathleen Kelm for their support in the first part of my studies. And thanks to Morag Gray, who found the right words in a moment where I already thought that I cannot go any further on my doctoral journey.

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how business professionals involved in experiential online learning can effectively promote business students' practical management skills development. Another objective is to help business educators to introduce practical relevance in business learning, teaching and assessment through experiential online learning at institutional level. The study adopts a constructivist perspective: new knowledge is constructed from the perspective of an internal researcher, which interacts with the institutional environment and is interrelated with its stakeholders. This study's research participants are business educators, students, practitioners as well as administrators. The research is conducted within an embedded single-case design while data is collected through various methods and within the researcher's own institutional context. The research findings section outlines the quantitative outcomes followed by the integrative qualitative discussion, where central categories and their properties and characteristics are presented. The integrative process with the objective to draw theoretical conclusions focusses on three major aspects: namely, practitioners' effective forms of engagement, business students' practical management skills development, as well as experiential online learning as the objects of research. In order to address the full scope of the practical aspects, interrelations with the institutional environment are involved. In order to involve practitioners effectively and to institutionalise practitioner-involvement successfully in formally-assessed higher business education, this study suggests a pedagogic framework that defines objectives in terms of practitioners' instructional orientation and that also adapts their instructional self-conception within an overarching role model. This study further proposes that such a pedagogic framework needs to be harmonised with the intended competence level of learning outcomes and activities, and aligned with educators' instructional activities and students' learning in and around the traditional classroom. In addition, this research suggests that the learning context and environment promotes the self-regulated and active engagement of all participants and defines institutional standards and careful integration measures in relation to practitioners' roles in educational core processes. The thesis concludes by suggesting practical development methods and further research agendas for business educators.

**Keywords:** *Practitioner Collaboration, Experiential Learning, Business Education, Online Learning*

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## **1 Introduction**

Business education is widely criticised for its lack of relevance for professional practice. A survey conducted by FTI Consulting (2011), commissioned by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACACICS), which conferred with over 1,000 decision-makers from US companies revealed that only 16% of job applicants are evaluated as well-equipped with workplace-related skills. It is not only pre-experience business education which is criticised. A similar picture is provided by Kamath, Agrawal and Krickx (2008) regarding post-experience business education. In terms of globally well-established Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes, they state that, even though management is a practice-oriented discipline, MBA programmes do not provide opportunities for real-world application and rather they focus “on analysis (science) rather than the art (vision) or craft (experience)” (p. 406).

In order to improve business education’s relevance and congruence for professional practice, academic-practitioner collaboration is considered. Friga, Bettis and Sullivan (2003, p. 237) underline practitioners’ potential in business research when they state that “It is important to recognize that knowledge creation takes place not only in ivory towers, but also in corporate boardrooms”. In addition, Kelliher, Harrington and Galavan (2010, p. 113) provide a captivating and simultaneously provocative argument regarding professionals’ potential role as an involved party in business education when they suggest “[i]n the physical sciences the researcher is generally more intelligent and knowledgeable than the object being studied. In a social science study the ‘object’ of study may be the expert”.

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### **1.1 Research Gap**

In Switzerland, as well as in other parts of German-speaking Europe, practitioners’ responsible involvement has a tradition that goes back to the mediaeval guilds, when craftsmen established rules and standards for future professionals’ education. Today, their successor organizations act as degree-granting bodies for a wide range of different professions within the Swiss higher education system (Baschung, Goastellec, & Leresche, 2011).

However, in international business education that generally follows the Anglo-Saxon model and degree structure, global accreditation standards such as those provided by the internationally well-recognized and reputed Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) (2013), the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) (2013) and the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) (2013) largely rule out the responsible involvement of professionals in formal business teaching, learning and assessment: even though the engagement of professional exponents and practitioner representatives in institutional governance processes and programme development activities is desired and promoted, the academic and professional qualification criteria for their business school faculties (AACSB 2013; ACBSP 2013; EFMD 2013) prevent their involvement in and around traditional classrooms. As a consequence, practitioner-involvement in teaching, learning and assessment in business education has been sporadically researched.

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## **1.2 Practical Motivation**

Fortunately, I had the opportunity to conduct my thesis research at my own institution, the HSO Business School Switzerland, of which I was the Chief Executive Officer until May 2015. HSO serves more than 2,500 students at eight locations in German-speaking Switzerland. Through its integrated portfolio of education programmes, ranging from Swiss national certificates and diplomas, postgraduate studies, bachelor as well as master and doctoral degrees, HSO's aim is to promote young professionals and future managers to climb the career-ladder by providing life-long education in the field of business and management (HSO, 2014). As one of the leading business schools in Switzerland, HSO has a focus on practice-oriented business education and, in the past, has been strongly committed to innovation and the ongoing development of effective learning and teaching.

The school was founded in 1954, while its Swiss-wide expansion started in 2007. As the prior Rector of two HSO schools, as Director of the European Business School Switzerland (which previously encompassed all higher education programmes and was later integrated into HSO as the department of higher education), and later as co-CEO and CEO, I had the opportunity to play a significant role in shaping HSO's



strategy and operations. In my position as co-CEO, I initiated the HSO Center of Excellence with the aim to further involve external stakeholders in strategically directed functions, e.g. for programme and curriculum development but also directly engaged in teaching, learning and assessment processes. My aim thereby was to establish a knowledge-productive network involving educators as well as managerial practitioners and experts from various fields and to link them to the HSO learner community in order to provide real-world learning opportunities and networking possibilities within students' fields of business, thus broadening their practical business skills and knowledge. I believed that through my strategic initiative, HSO could significantly increase the practical effectiveness and thus attractiveness of its business school programmes for both groups, namely its students as well as their employers.

However, a conceptual basis for successfully on-boarding external practitioners and involving them in formal business learning, teaching and assessment processes was missing and organisational steps toward a successful implementation ended in discussion and little else. Thus, when I started my thesis journey in summer 2014, I still was in my prior position as the CEO and one of my main motivations was to provide practical solutions for the successful engagement of external stakeholders within my own institution.

In March 2015 I decided to leave HSO Business School Switzerland. As a consequence, the main drive of my doctoral research shifted to the sectorial dimension of the relevance and congruence issue. Thus, the intended benefits of my research outcomes shall relate more to further research and its practical implementation at further business schools rather than in a specific institutional context.

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### **1.3 Research Purpose**

With my thesis research, I would like to promote effective practitioner-involvement in formally assessed business education teaching, learning and assessment in order to exploit business professionals and managers' potential as carriers of practical knowledge. My aim is to examine how practitioners can be effectively engaged,

leveraging synergies with forms of online learning, which I assume to have significant potential as a systemic basis for practical implementation: in particular, the possibility of expanding a business school's range towards practitioners' workplaces and their authentic environments (Kop, 2011). This possibility underlines the high potential to unlock synergies between business academia and professional practice in teaching, learning and assessment. As already proposed by Kelliher et al. (2010), such networks could be further developed to create sustainable collaborative (online) learning communities and integrated into higher education's formal business learning, teaching and assessment. Considering criticism regarding higher business education's relevance and congruence as well as the lack of prior research in the field of the study, I offer practical guidance and theoretical propositions in order to promote future research which may serve as a basis for further practical investigation and implementation.

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#### **1.4 Terminology**

Since there are various definitions of terms such as knowledge, skills, competence, ability and others, in the context of this study I would like to refer to the European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning (European Union, 2008a), and specifically the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework (European Union, 2008b), which has established a pragmatic definition of the cultural and linguistic definitions of the above-mentioned terms. According to the European Union (2008a, 2008b), knowledge is defined as factual or theoretical and is "the outcome of the assimilation of information through learning" described as "the body of facts, principles, theories and practices that is related to a field of work or study" (n.p.). Skills are defined as "the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems" encompassing two dimensions, namely the "cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) or practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments)" (n.p.). Competence, on the other hand, is more comprehensively defined. It means that learners show "the proven ability to [autonomously and responsibly] use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development" (n. p.).

Thus, if I discuss business education's lack of practical relevance, I focus on the gap between what business schools provide as theoretical or factual knowledge and what is actually needed by future or junior professionals in addition to what is expected by their employers in real-world situations. In terms of the congruence missing from how business skills are developed in business school programmes, I mean the missed possibility to apply cognitive and particularly practical skills in holistic and authentic real-world learning contexts, which prevents graduates from acquiring competence-building skills and becoming autonomous and responsible knowledge workers.

In my research, I will also refer to several educational concepts and frameworks which need to be defined at this point: first, the term distance education extends the geographic and temporal distance between the participants, namely the given institution, teachers and learners, depending on depending on the approaches developed over successive eras, such as cognitive-behaviourism, social constructivism, and lately connectivist pedagogy (Anderson & Dron, 2011).

Second, online courses and learning, which are also referred to as e-learning and include blended or hybrid learning, needs to be further defined. Referring to Allen and Seaman (2013, p. 7)

“[o]nline courses are those in which at least 80 percent of the course content is delivered online. Face-to-face instruction includes courses in which zero to 29 percent of the content is delivered online; this category includes both traditional and web facilitated courses. The remaining alternative, blended (sometimes called hybrid) instruction has between 30 and 80 percent of the course content delivered online”.

Third, since the conducted research took place within a marketing course at a business school offering business school programmes, the following terms also need to be further explained: business education usually provides undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate programmes in order to offer business the possibility of working “with graduates who are professionally trained, with a focus on a specific

function; and the ability to produce work jointly with others as a business organization” (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2010, p. 30).

Business education encompasses disciplines such as strategic and operations management, marketing, human resources management, organisational sciences and leadership, finance and accounting and many other knowledge and skill areas. These disciplines are usually contextualised in business organisations and environments where individuals and/or organisations seek to generate economic and/or social value. In particular, marketing education involves disciplines which focus on the creation and supply of goods and services and communication between market participants (producers, clients, suppliers and others) (Rüegg-Stürm, 2004).

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## 1.5 Thesis Structure

After this introduction, the thesis is divided into the following chapters:

**Chapter 2** is this dissertation’s **Literature Review** and is split into three sections: in the first section I discuss how business education incorporates the real-world in its learning and teaching, the second section sheds light on prior research on practitioner-involvement and in the third section I engage with newly derived synergetic potentials from recent developments in online pedagogy and which are relevant to this study. Each section reviews the theoretical relevance of these frameworks, thereby illustrating the practical perspective and theoretical challenges involved with a short conclusion at the end of each section. At the end of Chapter 2 I identify the research gap which acts as the basis of the formulation of the research goals and objectives in Section 3.

**Chapter 3** outlines the practitioner **Research Question**, illustrates my intended contribution to theory and practice as well as examining the underlying theory which informed my research. **Chapter 4** describes the **Research Methodology**, providing the theoretical foundation, the research design’s reasoning, an explanation of the case study design and the ethical considerations made before conducting my research. When describing the case study design, I also elaborate on the analytical strategy as the unit of analysis and the research participants. Finally, the data collection framework and research plan are detailed.

**Chapter 5** presents the Research Findings: while the first section contains the quantitative results and a short discussion of the preliminary conclusions, the second section provides the integrative qualitative discussion and elaborates on the dimensions and properties of each of the central categories.

The research findings, which have been presented after each section in the previous chapter, are consolidated in an integrative diagram, where the core categories and their theoretical interrelations are illustrated. These interrelations are the basis for the discussion of the central research question and the associated sub-question by providing the integrative story and the **Conclusions** of the case study in **Chapter 6**. In the same chapter, the **Impact of the Research**, focussing on the contribution to theory and practice, as well as the Strengths and **Limitations of the Study** and the **Recommendations** for future research and professional practice are provided.

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## **2 Literature Review**

In the following literature review I will first discuss how business education can respond to the need for skill-oriented education, focussing on experiential learning as an established form of practice-oriented business education, providing well-researched insights and knowledge on learning in real-world contexts. In the following section, I will provide a rationale for practitioner-involvement in the context of the experiential knowledge potential derived from professionals' role as life-long learners and knowledge workers, before discussing theoretical and practical concepts and frameworks concerning practitioner involvement in higher business education, namely in academic-practitioner research collaborations as well as forms of practitioner-engagement in learning and teaching. In this context, I will then elaborate on synergetic potentials for practitioner engagement drawing from recent trends and developments in online pedagogy and digital era learning environments. After each section, I provide preliminary conclusions that, at the close of this chapter, will flow into the theoretical and practical synthesis of the previously discussed concepts, identifying the gaps between theory and practical opportunities and challenges.

However, first I would like to open my discussion by shedding light on the social dimensions of the relevance and congruence issue as defined in Section 1.4, by referring to the recent report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 'Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators – Transition from school to work: Where are the 15-29 year-olds?' (2014, p. 362). According to that report, in OECD countries in 2012 approximately 40% of 15-29 year olds only work part-time, although they wished to work more. Also, 15% of these young people were neither employed or in education or training and are therefore defined as "NEET". The category of young people who are neither employed nor in education and training (NEET) encompasses the proportion which are either unemployed or inactive. As further detailed in this report (OECD, 2014, p. 365), this "group is particularly important as it includes discouraged young people who gave up looking for a job". Having a look at the numbers and the top five European countries at the end of the statistics, the Netherlands (7%), Luxembourg (8%), Norway (8%), Iceland (9%) and Switzerland (10%) demonstrate the lowest numbers of NEETs while the

Slovak Republic together with Hungary (19%), Ireland (21%), Italy (25%), Spain (26%) and Turkey (29%) rank highest.

However, considering that in countries with lower employability chances, young people remain (longer) in higher education due to a lack of opportunities, and it might be interesting to look at the overall employment rate for, respectively, the number of 15-29 year olds who are neither employed, registered students, or outside education, unemployed or inactive. In this case, the Netherlands (30%), Switzerland (31%), Austria (37%) and Iceland (38%) have the lowest numbers, while in Turkey (61%), Hungary (65%), Spain (66%), Italy (67%) and Greece (70%), the majority of young people have not made the transition from school to work.

From our perspective as educators, it is difficult to accept that in many European countries a third to fifth of our school graduates end up with no professional prospects. Even though the causes are manifold and the circumstances of each of the above-mentioned countries are specific to them, it must be a mission of higher education to provide education which is relevant to professional practice in order to increase our graduates' entry-level job employability and thus improve the chance of leading a valuable and personally responsible life. In this context, Mourshed (Economist, 2014, n.p.) states that "[i]mproving matters means ditching the outdated notion that education happens first and employment later" and, as also mentioned in the article published in the Economist (2014, n.p.), "[t]he real shortage is of the right skills, rather than of jobs".

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## **2.1 Business Education and the Real World**

In their study, where 21'319 managers and 2'644 students participated, Baldwin, Pierce, Joines and Farouk (2011) found out that managers often lack the competence to apply newly gained management knowledge in their professional context. Even though management competence is highly valued by organizations and its individual members, they state that such ability is still an expectation.

In this context, Baldwin et al. (2011) differentiate applied management knowledge (AMK), which they define as "the awareness and understanding of principles that

enable an individual to analyze a management situation, identify the important issues involved, and choose appropriate managerial actions” (p. 584) from conceptual and procedural (management) knowledge. Furthermore, they underline the importance of contextualization in order to foster transmission of learning into practice. In the context of this study, two promotive aspects for AMK which Baldwin et al. (2011) suggest seem to be relevant: first, the role of initial conceptual knowledge as the basis of transfer and second, the positive correlation between managers previously gained professional experience.

Stewart, Williams, Smith-Gratto, Sloan Black and Turner Kane (2011) examined students’ ability to acquire, share and apply knowledge in the context of decision making processes in organizations. They make the connection between the ability of individual learning and the application competence of management and leadership knowledge which, according to them, leads to and improvement of organization’s effectiveness.

As Baldwin et al. (2011), Stewart et al. (2011) also underline the role of learner’s social context for their individual learning and make the criticism, that “technical learning pedagogies” (p. 6) on an abstract level that are typically used in traditional classrooms “tend to emphasize learning concepts and models rather than skills” (p. 6). Furthermore, they state that such pedagogies focus on individual rather than socially interactive learning activities and that individual learning overemphasizes knowledge recall activities instead of its application in context.

In their study conducted at the Turku University of Applied Sciences in Finland, also Kairisto-Mertanen, Räsänen, Lehtonen and Lappalainen (2012) discuss the traditional role of education regarding its knowledge-orientation. In the context of innovation pedagogy, they emphasize the importance of applied knowledge in practice and an “interactive dialogue” (p. 67) situated between the students, their professional and societal environment and the educational institution. Furthermore, they share Stewart et al.’s (2011) as well as Baldwin et al.’s (2011) opinion in terms of universities’ focus on knowledge-orientation and lack of student’s competence to transfer it to their real-world context. They therefore suggest to develop students’



“interpersonal and networked competencies” (p. 71). Moreover, they conclude that “competencies are formed according to the needs and expectations in working life where the needs are dynamic and under a constant change” (p. 83).

In order to promote the effective learning of knowledge and skills (Green & Farazmand, 2012), thus enhancing learning outcomes (Aldas, Crispo, Johnson, & Price, 2010), educators are increasingly introducing experiential learning pedagogy into their programmes, particularly in business educational contexts. Experiential learning is defined as a process where new knowledge is generated continuously through a learner’s experience. (Kolb, 2015). As further explained by Kolb, Boyatzis and Mainemelis (1999, p. 2), Kolb’s model “portrays two dialectically related modes of grasping experience – Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization – and two dialectically related modes of transforming experience – Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE)”.

Another conceptual framework, namely Steinaker and Bell’s (1979) experiential learning taxonomy was introduced 37 years ago. However, their framework is still applied, for example by the Higher Education Academy, which recently published a report on the investigation on learner-teacher interaction (Morison & McMullan, 2013). As discussed by Morison and McMullan (2013), Steinaker and Bell provide a comprehensive framework for analysing learner-instructor interaction, one based on experiential learning theory. From their constructivist perspective

“learning is not viewed as a simple acquisition process based on teacher transmission of information but as a process whereby meaningful learning is achieved as the learner constructs and reconstructs conceptions of a phenomenon based upon his/her personal current and past knowledge or experience” (p. 4).

In a general sense, experiential learning underlines experience’s central role within the learning process and the holistic approach for adapting the real-world context involving all senses, thinking and behaviour (Li, Mobley, & Kelly 2013). Navarro (2008, p. 109) states that experiential learning’s recognition goes back to Confucius

(c. 450 BC) who wrote: "Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand". Hereby, accountability for solving real-world issues is created through action-oriented teaching and learning strategies, which connect the learner to authentic problems (Argyris, 1997). Learning is conducted as a process of planning, goal-setting and reflection, within an experientially-inclined thinking process that is carefully observed and outcomes reviewed. Experiential learners become empowered to develop their own cognitive, affective or physical skills, an empowerment which enlarges and intensifies the learning experience when developing their competencies within real-world learning contexts (Baden and Parkes, 2013).

The reasons behind implementing experiential learning in business school curricula are detailed in several articles. As reported by Green and Farazmand (2012), employers' expectations of graduates' employability are a challenge for their educators. They argue that economic crises alongside higher unemployment rates as well as cost-pressure particularly increase the demand for well-prepared students to fill entry-level positions and that educators' responsibilities to promote skills which advance students' professional development and careers are increasing.

Similarly, Hodge, Proudford and Holt (2014) discuss experiential learning as a core concept to successfully prepare undergraduate business students for their future career. They make the criticism that business education over relies on concepts and theories instead of focusing on the real-world. They term this the "knowing-gap", which they explain as the difference between what students know and what they can actually do.

Earlier research provides numerous examples of how effective experiential learning is in promoting real-world knowledge, skills and competences. At this point, I would like to outline a few of them to illustrate the potential of business education's two different groups of learners: undergraduate students, who usually do not have professional experience, and graduate students, who, as in the case of traditional MBA programmes, are post-experience students.

Ganesh and Sun (2009) adopted a simulation in a undergraduate capstone marketing module, where students improved their decision-making abilities. The major outcome of their research was that the intensive competitive game environment promoted “overwhelmingly positive” feedback (p. 12). Also in an undergraduate education context but with different pre-experiential conditions, Green and Farazmand (2012) examined the learning outcomes of case study projects and internships in five marketing courses at a college of business and management. While the first part of the course was focused on traditional forms of classroom learning and assignments, the second part was dedicated to developing experiential learning projects. Through correlation analysis of study groups with and without prior internship experience, they concluded that those students who had previously conducted an internship and showed practical experience could improve learning outcomes in their experiential project.

Also, in post-experience programmes such as the traditional MBA programme, experiential learning’s effectiveness for practical business and management skills development is undisputed. In their article, Kamath et al. (2008) discuss the challenges and results of experiential action learning implemented in a “global consulting program that is integrated into an international EMBA program for mid-career and senior American and European managers” (p. 403), thus not in a post-experience not an undergraduate, pre-experience format. They compared student improvement ratings against 78 other programmes and found out that all evaluated management skills categories in the examined experiential action learning programme exceeded those of the surveyed peer schools.

In their study, Hart and Mrad (2013) compared learning outcomes, student satisfaction and self-efficacy in a MBA-level course on marketing strategies, one which was taught with and without experiential learning assignments. They found out that the students engaged in experiential learning projects appraised the course as supportive for mastering their class materials and deemed it to be promotive of their practical competence to apply previously learnt theoretical concepts. Students further reported that experiential learning enhanced their satisfaction on the course as well as with the instructor and that their self-confidence regarding their own real-world

business competencies had increased. In their argumentation, Hart and Mrad (2013) explain that experiential learning has a mainly positive impact on students' self-confidence and self-efficacy, since their achievements in a real-world learning context empower them for their future careers. They go on to emphasise experiential learning's potential for interdisciplinary application in holistic-authentic settings and for promoting experience at the group level while fostering creative, problem-solving and leadership skills. Regarding future business students, Hart and Mrad (2013) provide another reason to incorporate experiential learning forms into the business school curriculum: to involve students with new learning styles, which have, according to Hart and Mrad (2013), become increasingly different compared to what students experienced in earlier generations.

To summarize, experiential learning is a well-established and recognised practice-oriented learning approach and has provided valuable concepts and frameworks in order to successfully engage business students in beneficial real-world learning: through direct encounters with authentic, complex and dynamic learning contexts, experiential learning offers a key concept for practical skills development and, as discussed in the context of this study, can increase the business congruence of business school programmes. Experiential learning has been successfully implemented on different levels, in undergraduate education as well as in post-experience management programmes. Its benefits are readily apparent, as has been suggested by several studies.

The aim of this study is to successfully engage professionals and their professional and managerial environments and develop them as authentic learning contexts. Furthermore, theoretical gaps as well as practical hurdles, such as how to formally assess and institutionally implement and coordinate learning outside the classroom, still need to be addressed.

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## **2.2 Practitioner-Engagement in Business Education**

In this section, I will first provide the reasoning behind practitioner-involvement, followed by a discussion of the literature on different forms of practitioner involvement in a business educational context. The discussion is divided in two parts: in the first

section, I focus on the literature on academic-practitioner research collaboration while, in the second section, practitioner engagement in learning, teaching and assessment will be discussed.

Taylor (2010) explains that in the ‘old economy’, graduates typically learnt what they needed during their university studies, then they learned some more in their transition to work, and then when returning to university for annual training. Today, even though relevant skills and knowledge are still taught during their time at university and when entering the job market,

“in addition they need to be able to find information and to learn quickly while on the job – and much more frequently than once a year. Some people are very good at this. They use modern technology to find information (typically using search engines) or people with expertise (through social networks). Others will need to be shown how to best use such tools” (n.p.).

His statement on continuing workplace-embedded experiential learning corresponds to recent European political initiatives (Óhidy, 2008; European Union, 2008a; Riddell, Markowitsch, & Weedon, 2012), which aim to widen participation in higher education towards professionals’ workplaces. Van den Dungen (2009) underlines the importance of such life-long learning strategies and frameworks, which require new concepts based on dual track education to involve professionals as life-long students.

In my opinion, it is important to note that business professionals, middle managers and senior executives are not only life-long learners. At the same time, as potential employers of future graduates and decision-makers in managerial practice, they are also the main stakeholders in higher business education institutions. Furthermore, and a key aspect from my perspective as business educator and in the context of this study, practitioners are also valuable and experienced holders of business knowledge and management skills. This means that practitioners’ effective involvement can induce the significant qualitative growth of business knowledge in

relation to management education. However, business academics' and practitioners' contrasting self-conception may constitute aggravating circumstances:

Heckscher and Martin-Rios (2013) describe the self-conception of universities and academics, illustrating a model based on self-governing autonomy and sublimity within an academic guild that exclusively shares disciplinary understanding apart from outside criticism. And even though stakeholder-orientation has increased in most academic disciplines, they argue that particularly research is still "obscure and inaccessible to the lay public, aimed only at preaching to a choir of fellow academics." (p. 137). They conclude that higher education needs to be fundamentally reorganized in order to gain responsiveness to stakeholders and propose collaborative academic organizations in order to engage them.

Similarly, Butler, Delaney and Spoelstra (2015) make the criticism, "that academics incentivized to produce knowledge that is assessed by peers and published in highly ranked journals rather than being judged by practitioners and used in organizations" (p. 732) which, according to them, leads to knowledge with little practical impact. They discuss that ways to increase practical relevance conducted by business educators are still under-researched and propose new forms of collaboration that go beyond research. Even though Butler et al. (2015) point out the "different systems of meaning" (p. 733) between science and practice, they suggest business scholar activities beyond the institutional borders in order to promote relevance to professional practice. Therefore, they identified four main motivational factors for business scholars, namely: a positive impact, mutual learning, material rewards and self-worth.

In their article, Bartunek and Rynes (2014) characterize this academic-practitioner gap as "dichotomous" (p. 1181). They argue that differences in the way of communication, logical and conceptual perspectives as well as motivations and interests may be promotive for rigour and relevant practical research since "exploration can suggest important knowledge that is pertinent not only to academics and practitioners, but also to other relationships that include tensions of some sort" (p. 1182). They identify major tensions and dialectics and sum up, that they are

paradoxical and are important to be managed, in order to promote effective collaboration.

More focused, Beech, MacIntosh and MacLean (2010) examined such relationship between practitioners and academics from a dialogic perspective, focussing on research's practical relevance. They conceptualize dialogue "as involving different actors, with varying intents, orientations and trajectories, and producing a range of outcomes" (p. 1343) and identified its participants, intentions, orientation and outcomes in co-productive relationships. As a major outcome, Beech et al. (2010) conclude that academic-practitioner relationship generally show a self-defeating character. However, they also state that participants act as "willing co-learners and enquirers" (p. 1361) and underline the importance of a shared contextual intention and participants' co-ownership. Interestingly, they found out that the shared experience as social outcome was the basis for new knowledge production. They state "commonality of the experience is a powerful factor in relation to the relevance of any insights generated" (p. 1362) and suggest to shift the practitioner-academic dialogue from self-defeat to challenge-orientation where new ideas and practice may be developed.

To summarize, previous literature criticizes academic's self-conception and its role in relation to business and management practice. At the same time, the potential of academic-practitioner dialogue as the basis for practically relevant research and co-productive relationships as well as the importance for higher education to manage them is underlined. However, even though previous research identified motivational factors in terms of business scholars' involvement, practitioners' self-conception in the context of collaborative relationships in teaching, learning and research remains unfocused.

In the next section, I will continue my discussion by illustrating the potential of practitioner-involvement in higher business education in order to increase business school programmes' relevance and congruence.

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### **2.2.1 Academic-Practitioner Research Collaboration**

Practitioner-involvement in business research has been widely discussed. The questions of how to create collaborative relationships between management practitioners and academics, which approaches lead to effective co-productive relationships at institutional level, as well as how to provide effective research strategies and tools to examine professional practice have already been brought into focus.

Hughes and colleagues discuss the academic-practitioner gap in several articles (Hughes, O'Regan, & Wornham, 2008; Hughes, Tapp and Hughes, 2008; Hughes, Bence, Grisoni, O'Regan and Wornham, 2011): regarding strategic management disciplines, they argue that there is a lack of collaborative research and dissemination models which, from their perspective, means that business academia's value chain does not provide business-congruent research (Hughes et al., 2008). Bennis and O'Toole (2005) outline the reason for their critique, namely, that highly reputed business schools "have quietly adopted an inappropriate – and ultimately self-defeating – model of academic excellence" (p. 98): instead of their students' practical competence, they measure themselves in terms of their academic rigorousness.

Three main issues regarding practitioners' absence from research can be identified. First, and from a methodological perspective, business research and its research methods as used in professional practice have a practical value. Second, there is the question of the impact of business research on professional practice and, third, the value of the knowledge generated for graduates as future professionals.

Bartunek, Rynes and Draft (2001) discuss academic-practitioner collaboration within organisational science disciplines. They state that while research methods have steadily improved, at the same time they have become less useful for organisational practitioners. In another article, Bartunek (2007) discusses how management research's impact on management practice has been a distinct topic of concern since the foundation of the *Academy of Management Journal* in 1958 and this raises the question of how to create co-productive relationships between management practitioners and scholars.



Another perspective is provided by Baron, Richardson, Earles and Khogeer (2011), who discuss practitioner-involvement in the field of marketing education. They underline the employer's desire that not only should marketing research be useful for marketing practice, but that marketing education should provide knowledge and skills relevant to graduates' future workplaces. Among others issues, they criticise academic research's accessibility to practitioners for two main reasons: first, the imbalance between academic rigorousness and practical relevance, and second, the missing rooting of research in professional practice.

Amabile, Patterson, Mueller, Wojcik, Kramer, Odomirok and Marsh (2001) acknowledge the potential benefits of academic-practitioner collaboration in research. In their case study based on academic-practitioner management research collaboration, they identify three main potential benefits of such cooperation: namely, shaping practically meaningful research questions, gaining access to research fields, and designing methods and instruments for data collection and analysis in work environments. Bartunek (2007) recognises practice-oriented research methods, such as action research, which foster collaboration between academics and scholars and thereby positively contribute to bridging the gap between management research and practice. Donovan (2005) also discusses "The Benefits of Academic/Practitioner Collaboration" and – referring to Beaver's triangle of practice – research and teaching, states that there is a high potential in academic-practitioner collaboration and that academia needs to coordinate joint efforts.

However, there are also various challenges identified in fostering academic-practitioner research collaboration. Amabile et al. (2001) illustrate three crucial factors, namely "collaborative team characteristics, collaboration environment characteristics, and collaboration processes" (p. 418) required to fulfill the above-mentioned potentials. As one of the major research outcomes, they elaborate on the high potential for conflict between academics and practitioners due to their different backgrounds and thus understandings. Bartunek et al. (2001) discuss the major concerns practitioner-involvement in research faces, namely that such approaches are criticised as too narrow, short-term in outlook and commercially-driven.

Still, in order to increase the relevance and congruence of research-generated knowledge, a more proactive, sustainable and systemic engagement of practitioners in business research is proposed. Hughes et al. (2008) suggest academic-practitioner collaboration, which “needs to be proactively developed and managed” (p. 228). Similarly, Donovan (2005) proposes enduring relationships rather than short-term activities, and demands a strong commitment from both involved parties. In Donovan’s opinion, such collaboration ideally links universities and major corporations, providing funding for their work on relevant research projects and states that “[i]f cooperation were formalized, the realisation of potential projects would be enhanced if academics spent time with a practitioner firm and practitioners spent visitor-in-residence terms in universities” (2005 p. 451). Amabile et al. (2001) propose more frequent and well-planned formal communication, which may play a crucial role in academic-practitioner research collaboration. Bartunek et al. (2001) respond with broadly defined approaches to knowledge conversion via academic-practitioner research collaboration, while Baron et al. (2011) promote a discussion of co-creative processes and the inclusion of practical elements in marketing programmes involving technology for knowledge dissemination.

More comprehensively, Hughes et al. (2008) discuss several knowledge exchange processes and identify relevant routes and crucial factors regarding the effective creation and dissemination of marketing knowledge. According to the article, routes for exchanging knowledge include “Courses and programmes”, “Publication”, “Conferences”, “Knowledge networks”, “Professional bodies”, “Academic consultancy” as well as “Commercial consultants” (p. 225), while the crucial factors are identified as based on individual, institutional, content and relationship levels. They argue that business academia and practice can shape a common value proposition, and they go on to suggest practitioner participation in collaborative research activities in order to increase marketing research’s relevance for professional practice.

In a third article Hughes et al. (2011) provide a further “starting point” (p. 40) for practitioner-involvement, proposed as a basis for institutional approaches at business

schools. In addition to their prior research, where they already suggested multiple-simultaneous routes of knowledge exchange and dissemination, they argue that “the strongest engagements take place where “[w]illing & able” academics engage with “[e]nthusiasts” across a large number of different routes” (p. 52).

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### **2.2.2 Practitioners Involved in Learning and Teaching and Assessment**

In the context of a shift from a scientific-oriented to a professional model, Clinebell and Clinebell (2008) discuss practitioners’ potential to promote real-world experience by including the latter as “executive professors” in business school teaching. They highlight that an increasing number of executives are already involved as faculty members without a doctoral degree, based solely on their professional qualification and experience and without degrading academic rigour. In their concluding recommendations, among other aspects they advise matching practitioners’ expertise with the programme they might teach, to prepare them for their corporate-academic transition, and, furthermore, underline the potential to develop business community relations as well as industry partnerships.

Similarly, Elmuti (2004, p. 439) also criticises management education’s characteristics and its practical relevance and raises the provocative question “Can management be taught?” and “If so, what should management education curricula include and how should the process be approached?”. To answer the initial question, he suggests that, indeed, most management aspects can be taught. However, Elmuti (2004) argues that even though management can be taught, educators need to consider that some knowledge is more challenging to impart than other forms. Regarding educators’ role and characteristics, he then concludes that “not all people are suitable to be taught management just as not all are suitable to teach it” and proposes that instead of career academics, prior business leaders and managers should pass on their knowledge and experience to future managers (p. 451).

Such a direct practitioner-involvement in higher business education has been examined by Kelliher et al. (2010), who illustrate practitioner-academic collaboration in leadership education for pre-experience students. As is the case in Elmuti (2004),

they also criticise traditional classrooms' narrow developmental approaches and propose an alternative knowledge dissemination model for leadership education for undergraduates, where business leaders directly participate in students' professional development in a co-productive setting. They particularly emphasise the potential of their professional context's richness as well as their experience and intuition, which has the capacity to build an extended and balanced basis for professional skills development within "a continuous cycle of applied study and informed feedback facilitated by the practitioner–academic classroom partnership" (p. 116). However, even though they explicitly propose a participatory approach, they argue that managerial leaders as the only educators has the "risk of orienting the educational system too much towards practical utility rather than pure knowledge (...) as there may be issues of attribution and confirmatory biases when describing context-specific experiences" (2010, p. 118).

While Clinebell and Clinebell (2008), Elmuti (2004) and Kelliher et al. (2010) discuss mainly practitioners' involvement in traditional classroom learning and teaching, another established form of academia-industry collaboration outside academia is found in 'work integrated learning' (WIL). WIL may be defined as "a range of programs which provide students with a combination of workplace experience and formal learning which are integrated as part of a course of study in higher education" (Precision Consultancy, 2007, p. 29). This means that such programmes are based on industries' practical needs as well as the expectations of graduates and future employees, the latter needing to be integrated into the business schools' curricula. Therefore, a framework for coordinating and assessing students' work-embedded and experiential learning is required (Yap, 2012).

Wait (2014) provides several examples of WIL's successful implementation in business school contexts: for example at the School of Business at the University of Sydney in Australia, the Berufsakademie Ravensburg in Germany or at the University of Science and Technology Beijing in China, where students are exposed to real-world situations outside the classroom in business, engineering or hospitality. Wait (2014) underlines the advantages of WIL in terms of relationship management with industries, research opportunities or professional exchange programmes for

academic and industry staff. In her study of a workplace integrated project, Yap (2012) could identify several opportunities and benefits for business students who participated in an industry placement programme where they conducted a project alongside professional practice. Students reported increased self-confidence and satisfaction through autonomous learning possibilities and, in addition, that they could gain new skills and develop problem-solving and communication skills through workplace embedded experiential learning.

The challenges identified in Yap's (2012) research are particularly interesting for this study, since the research was conducted within a practical context, engaging academics and professionals in formal learning processes. Students made the criticism that the course workload was more time-consuming and challenging in comparison with similar level courses without integrated workplace learning. What was interesting was the identification of 'conflicting expectations', namely "workplace supervisors' aspirations for the project and academic mentors' requirements for assessment purposes" (p. 135). Yap has concluded that "[t]here is a clear need to work more closely with workplace partners to ensure there is a nexus between curriculum and the university and the requirements of the workplace" (p. 135).

Another relevant issue which was highlighted in this study concerns the assessment of learning within the practical context. Yap (2012) claims that pedagogic concepts and assessment frameworks within a work-based setting are still at an early stage and that workplace-embedded learning is a challenging undertaking due to dynamic (and thus unpredictable) internal and external factors. As Yap goes on to explain, the assessment criteria in the conducted study focused on academic skills rather than workplace competencies. This meant that feedback from the supervising practitioners at students' workplaces was not included in the formal assessment. Yap (2012, p. 136) therefore proposes a "redesign of the assessment to include such an evaluation [which] may help inform the assessment process to try and recognise differing student achievements in the workplace" (p. 136). Yap thereby emphasises the need for capacities from academic staff as well as workplace supervisors to coordinate these learning and assessment processes.

To summarise, even though business education is often missing practical relevance as discussed in the literature and as research collaborations have proposed, the responsible involvement of practitioners in formal business learning, teaching and assessment has only been the subject of occasional research. Thus, the discussion as to whether and how far business leaders and managers should be involved in the imparting of real-world competencies as practical experts to business students still has to take place. Conceptually, such an involvement is at an early stage. Promising frameworks such as workplace-integrated learning, which focusing mainly on students with employment possibilities or post-experience business students, reveal the potential of co-productive learning, teaching and assessment processes. However, the challenges of the complex business environment, which is outside the academic locus of control – challenges that concern the formal assessment of learning as well as possible role conflicts between the academics and professionals involved – still need to be further examined.

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### **2.3 Recent Developments in Online Pedagogy**

As illustrated in the last section, practitioner-involvement in learning and teaching focuses mainly on traditional classrooms. While prior research on experiential learning appears to provide evidence that it successfully enhances learning in and around traditional classrooms (Aldas et al., 2010; Baden & Parkes, 2013; Ganesh & Sun, 2009; Green & Farazmand, 2012; Hart & Mrad, 2013; Hodge et al., 2014, Kamath et al., 2008), I would like to continue my discussion by exploring online learning, which has been much less researched, while business education offers a wide range of possibilities to promote effective skills development learning in and around traditional classrooms, and technologically-enhanced experiential approaches have only been marginally researched.

Even though online education is well-established and one third of US students are enrolled on at least one online course during their studies (Allen & Seaman, 2013), in formal business education learning and teaching this reality has not been adapted to current higher business education accreditation and quality assurance standards (AACSB, 2013; ACBSP, 2013; EFMD, 2013). In business education, traditional forms of classroom learning are still the focus of regulations and recommendations. At this

point, it is possible to say that business schools also need to consider how they address postgraduates as life-long learners and ask how they may implement adaptive strategies for knowledge creation and skills development, while business accreditation bodies need to provide corresponding frameworks for the assurance of online learning in their standards.

In terms of technology's role in learning, Wan, Fang and Neufeld (2007) already suggest further research in order to build more comprehensive educational concepts in what they define as "technologymediated learning" (p. 183). As a framework, they propose an input-process-output model, which closely corresponds to Biggs' (1987) 3P model of learning and teaching that defines relevant presage, process and product factors in students' learning. In addition to the original situational, processual and performance criteria which have been adapted to several learning frameworks, they more specifically discuss technological dimensions regarding the instructional design, learning process and outcomes. Wan et al. (2007) conclude, that "[t]he underlying assumptions of traditional learning have to be challenged, and the educational institutions should provide more institutional support to the instructional innovation" (p 189).

Similarly, Edmondson (2007) criticizes, that even though E-Learning had become an important part of off-campus learning activities, the learning strategies still follow approaches of knowledge acquisition and skills promotion as traditionally applied in "paper and pencil" settings. In order to discuss effective ways in online learning she discusses Gardner's typology of "multiple intelligences" (p. 35). According to Gardner (2011) there are nine distinctive types of intelligences, namely the naturalist, musical, linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, existential and spatial intelligence. As discussed by Edmondson (2007) particularly learners with strong interpersonal intelligence may develop valuable learning experience through social interaction with others, since they are able to effectively collaborate. Thus, in the context of this study, for this group, a learning design that promotes further possibilities for practitioner-collaboartion might promote a particularly valuable basis for knowledge generation and skills acquisition (Edmondson, 2007; Gardner, 2011).

A comprehensive framework for experiential e-learning was provided by Carver, King, Hannum and Fowler's (2007), which adopts experiential education's aim to directly engage students in the real-world context being studied and, at the same time, links their experience to the virtual learning environment. Carver et al.'s (2007) framework of experiential e-learning (ee-learning) characterises six types of ee-learning, namely content sharing, online conversations, meaningful online conversations, drawing on student experiences, problem-based/service learning, and direct experience/action learning. The learner-centred concept provides an instructional model, focusing on the spheres of experience and communication technologies: they argue that "the more students' experiences and interactions are drawn into the course design and activities, the more online education can bolster agency, belongingness, and competence among online students", which, alongside learner-centredness, are the core categories of their ee-learning concept (Baasanjav, 2013, p. 577).

In the last decade, technology-mediated learning have become a popular strategy for student engagement. As discussed by Lawlor, Tangney and Marshall (2016), the next generation of higher education students often show more technical competence than their teachers. As stated, their engagement may create meaningful and thus motivational learning experience where self-directed and collaborative forms of technology-mediated learning is provided. In their study, Henrie, Halverson and Graham (2015) categorize various forms of technology-mediated learning, namely "blended learning", "computer assisted instruction", "computer managed instruction", "courseware", "electronic learning", "integrated learning systems", "intelligent tutoring systems", "online courses", "mobile learning", "virtual classrooms", "web based instruction" and "distance education" (p. 39).

In particular, new concepts and frameworks in the field of distance learning pedagogy have created new opportunities for online learning. In their comprehensive article on distance learning pedagogy, Anderson and Dron (2011) differentiate pedagogical concepts and frameworks into three generations, namely the cognitive-behaviourist, social-constructivist and, lately, connectivist pedagogies.



According to them, cognitive-behaviourist approaches were popular in the latter half of the last century, where learners constructed new knowledge by conducting a structured process where their needs and interests were stimulated and “informed by both general and specific cases of overriding principles and then tested and reinforced for the acquisition of this knowledge” (p. 83). This was followed by a social-constructivist pedagogy, which they describe as individual knowledge construction “developed in conjunction with the development of two-way communication technologies” (p. 84). They further outline such learning as being situated in an authentic learning context, namely workplace-embedded and related to other real-world situations outside the traditional classroom, where learners become actively involved. Finally, as the third and latest generation of distance-education pedagogy, Anderson and Dron (2011) define connectivism. Here, they underline the importance of providing opportunities “to gain a sense of self-efficacy in networked-based cognitive skills and the process of developing their own net presence” (p. 87).

Connectivism is defined as the learning theory of the “digital age” (Clarke, 2013, p. 407), and was introduced by Siemens and Downes as a response to the changing context of what, how and where people learn, which contrasted with behaviorist theories “where the stimulus/response of observable behaviour involved in task-based learning is the focus” (p. 407). As explained by Downes (2007, n.p.),

“[a]t its heart, connectivism is the thesis that knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and therefore that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks. (...) This implies a pedagogy that (a) seeks to describe 'successful' networks (...) and (b) seeks to describe the practices that lead to such networks...”.

In their recent article that comprehensively analysed trends in the field of distance education research based on reviews of 861 articles from seven peer-reviewed journals from 2009-2013, Bozkurt et al. (2015) confirm connectivism’s growing relevance as a learning theory for the knowledge economy. They explain this rising importance by the increasing relevance of networks and technology in learning and teaching. They go on to argue,

“[i]t is clear that theories that explain how learning occurs on networks (connectivism, social networking) through collaboration in a community (community of inquiry, collaborative learning, social learning theory, activity theory) by interaction, based on immersion (critical thinking) and experience (constructivism, problem based learning, social constructivism theory) are favored by DE [Distance Education] researchers” (Bozkurt et al., 2015, p. 344).

In the context of this study, such alternative approaches which enable higher education institutions to widen their range towards professional practice and to involve external professionals require discussion. Connectivist forms of knowledge creation (Downes, 2007) might be particularly relevant, since such online learning networks are able to directly link the learning to the learning object (Yeager, Hurley-Dasgupta, & Bliss, 2013). Here, the learning object of future graduates is the managerial practice and the business professional and leader acting in his or her authentic business environmental context. As confirmed by Kop (2011), students are able to make their own connections and learn individually outside the academic institution's locus of control. Such connections may vary in terms of their hierarchical setting: from top-down, to bottom-up, from instruction to learner (or vice versa). Also, the quantity of such network relationships differs, such as one-to-many or many-to-many, as well as concerning in which direction the knowledge between the participants flows (Kop, 2011). As added by Anderson and Dron (2011), connectivism “focuses on building and maintaining networked connections that are current and flexible enough to be applied to existing and emergent problems” (p. 87). Here, in order to fulfil their learning challenges, confident and literate “learners have access to powerful networks” (p. 87). Reflecting Taylor's (2010) discussion on using technology to find knowledge and knowledge experts for knowledge production, I would like to continue my discussion by elaborating on the potential of recently introduced connectivist learning approaches (Downes, 2007) by focussing on their practical expression and the theoretical challenges which arise therefrom.

In practical terms, the concept of connectivism has been primarily implemented through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs):

“A MOOC is an online course with the option of free and open registration, a publicly shared curriculum, and open-ended outcomes. MOOCs integrate social networking, accessible online resources, and are facilitated by leading practitioners in the field of study. Most significantly, MOOCs build on the engagement of learners who self-organize their participation according to learning goals, prior knowledge and skills, and common interests” (McAuley, Stewart, & Cormier, 2010, p. 10).

As opposed to Clarke (2013) who generally assigns the concept of connectivism to MOOCs, Anderson and Dron (2011) suggest a differentiated theoretical perspective, one drawn from the driving technology, learner activities, learner and content granularity and the teacher’s role as well as scalability. In the current literature, their categorisation is shared by most authors in relation to the emerging trend of MOOCs, which reflects the variation of xMOOCs and cMOOCs and their different underlying learning philosophies. Overall, xMOOCs are centrally delivered, structured and coordinated within an online learning management system where the content is selected and curated by the instructor (Skrypnyk, Joksimović, Kovanović, Gašević, & Dawson, 2015). This content often contains videos, online quizzes and question-and-answer online discussion forums.

On the other hand, within cMOOCs, individual learning is emphasised. Learners “establish their personal learning network through nodes and connections (...) considered extensions of personal learning environments (PLE) and personal learning networks (PLN)” (Kesim and Altınpulluk, 2015, p. 17). This means that cMOOCs promote learner autonomy concerning the intended learning outcomes as well as regarding the learning process (Hollands & Tirthali, 2014). On the other hand, as described by Anderson and Dron (2011) and further discussed by Hollands and Tirthali (2014) and Bates (2012), xMOOCs share their characteristics with traditional behaviourist approaches, where the courses are prepared by instructors and learners are in a rather reactive and thus passive role. Bates (2012) makes the further criticism that instead of creating learning environments where learners can think critically and act creatively, xMOOCs aim to transmit knowledge directly.

From a practical perspective, recent research on connectivist forms of MOOCs provides rich insights regarding connectivism's practical benefits and challenges, based on which I would like to continue my discussion. Regarding the learner's role, Clarke (2013) describes how MOOCs are built on the self-organised engagement of learners, which means that they are based on students' prior skills and knowledge, learning goals and common interests, and provide a learning environment where collaborative knowledge creation is promoted by various forms of its distribution and storage. Within these networks, Skrypnik et al. (2015) describe the importance of the instructor's coordinative role in facilitating communication in order to interconnect learners' dispersed personal learning environments among each other, where, according to Clarke (2013, p. 408) "social meaning is created by learners' engagement and participation in social and cultural contexts."

Kop (2011) refers to the originators of the concept of connectivism, Siemens and Downes, who explicitly propose an absence of formal teaching strategies and suggest a rather dynamic environment where educators take on the role as facilitators or even stay completely absent, a situation which Siemens and Downes explored. This would mean an "active engagement of people with resources in communication with others, rather than the transfer of knowledge from educator to learner" (Kop, 2011, p. 20).

However, this is where Anderson and Dron (2011, p. 89) identify a major challenge for the implementation of connectivist approaches (Downes, 2007) within formal learning settings, as institutional learning is typically designed in a top-down fashion, potentially oversteering the bottom-up relations which are inherent within a connectivist learning network. Furthermore, they discuss the massive time expenditures required in order to maintain a certain amount of connected nodes and to coordinate them within the network. They thereby identify a certain coordinative presence as crucial before students start feeling lost or confused. They underline that

"[t]he distributed nature and inherent fuzziness of goals, beginnings, and endings implied by a connectivist approach often fit poorly with a context in

which students are taking more formal and traditional courses that use a constructivist and or a cognitive-behaviourist model” (p. 89).

Kop (2011) identifies three more challenges concerning connectivist learning, namely, the crucial circumstances regarding learners’ literacies, the ability to become autonomously involved in the network as well as the critical level of presence within the network. In order to overcome these challenges, she underlines the potential of traditional forms of formal education which promote social interaction as the basis of teaching and learning processes. She raises the questions “[w]hat type of structure might then aid learners in overcoming the aforementioned challenges?” and “[w]hat can be done to engage learners in critical learning on an open network?” (p. 24). She refers to Carroll, Kop and Woodward (2008) who emphasise the crucial role of a comfortable, trusting and valued learning environment as a basis for continuous engagement. As a major challenge, they see the potential to build an online learning community where content is aggregated, connections are developed and where participants socially interact based on their individual needs and purposes.

A further crucial aspect of connectivist approaches identified and considered as relevant for this study are students’ heterogenic knowledge and experiential bases, their differing learning needs and motivation, and the consequences of their engagement. These conditions are often found in a business educational context, particularly in post-experience programmes, where educational biographies and experiential backgrounds differ widely within the same courses and cohorts. As stated by Milligan, Littlejohn and Margaryan (2013, p. 149), even though “[c]onnectivist massive open online courses (cMOOCs) represent an important new pedagogical approach ideally suited to the network age (...) little is known about how the learning experience afforded by cMOOCs is suited to learners with different skills, motivations, and dispositions.”

In their study, they found that students’ prior experience is an important factor for their learning success: learning within a virtual network “is fundamentally different from learning in a formal course” (p. 156) and students who had previously participated in a cMOOC were more actively engaged than those with no prior

participation. Also, the understanding of “the nature of learners and their engagement is critical to the success of any online education provision, especially those where there is an expectation that the learner should self-motivate and self-direct their learning” (p. 157). In this context, motivational factors were identified as a determinant, as they discovered that passive learners have less well-informed objectives than those who more intensively participate within the learning community.

At this point, I would like to draw a preliminary conclusion regarding online learning approaches derived from connectivist theory (Downes, 2007): they seem to be very promising in terms of creating co-productive business learning environments which involve academics, practitioners and students. The potential for increasing business education’s range to assimilate relevant business knowledge by involving the knowledge holders from outside academia is obvious, because learners have the opportunity to retain access to a knowledge network where they are not only able to gain relevant business knowledge: moreover, they may have the opportunity to autonomously and responsibly develop management skills in relation to overall business competence by their application in a variety of environmental contexts.

However, providing networked learning within a formally-assessed framework might be a challenge that needs to be practically researched: in particular learners’ intended autonomy within a curriculum-based and outcome-assessed learning process may be a conceptual core which is difficult to fulfil in practice. In this context, academics’ and instructors’ roles need to be clearly defined and brought together to an overarching pedagogical concept that also encompasses students’ activities in traditional classrooms as well as online learning environments.

Regarding the online learning environment, systemic adoptions based on the overarching pedagogic concept need to be implemented and requirements must be considered which provide an inviting, positive climate and, at the same time, easy-to-use and accessible platforms. From an institutional perspective, the coordinative academic and/or managerial staff within such a learning arena would face completely new challenges regarding their role and time constraints, and this will certainly

include a deep processual-systemic change. But, above all, it is a strategic and cultural challenge that has to be overcome.

To conclude my review on the emergent literature regarding connectivism's potential, I would like to return to Anderson and Dron (2011, p. 90), who state

“a great many speculative and theoretical papers have been written on the potential of connectivism, most reports of experience so far are equivocal and, to cater to diverse learner needs, there is a clear need for a richer means of establishing both networked and personal learning environments that offer control when needed in both pedagogical and organizational terms”.

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## **2.4 Experiential Online Learning**

In terms of online learning environmental contexts, experiential and authentic learning concepts provide further practical and valuable approaches which need to be reviewed in the context of this study. In their early article Richmond and Cummings (2005) provide an applied framework based on Kolb's Learning Styles (2015) for implementation in online distance education. Regarding an effective instructional design, they underline the importance of considering aspects such as course structure, facilitator-learner communication, assessment and learning resources. As an exemplar, Richmond and Cummings (2005) illustrate an online course design implemented in an education psychology undergraduate course, where they assign criteria relating to student activities, content delivery, evaluation and instructional style to Kolb's (2015) environmental pre-conditions (affective, symbolic, perceptual and behavioural), which they consider as crucial for effective experiential learning. Thus, and opposed to connectivism (Downes, 2007), Richmond and Cummings (2005) base their concept on a strong instructional role and structured learning processes. However, regarding the arrangement as well as the facilitation of learning, they warn that instructors “may be more concerned with the mechanics of course delivery than with the individual concerns of students” (p. 53).

In an online contribution thematically linked to his recently published book *Teaching in a Digital World*, Tony Bates (2014a) published an add-on addressing aspects of experiential online learning. As he reports, proponents of experiential learning are often very critical in terms of online learning, since they argue that “it is impossible to embed online learning in real world examples” since “online learning is not ‘real world’” (n.p.). However, Bates adds that this oversimplifies online learning and provides various examples of how to implement blended or fully online experiential learning processes, e.g. by including multimedia resources or by online collaboration tools such as synchronous and asynchronous communication tools.

Even though Bates (2014a) notes that ‘real world’ experiential online learning carries the risk of being too expensive, impractical and even a dangerous undertaking, he focuses on concepts such as online simulations or ‘second life’ constructs. However, his discussion does not address online learning in the real world, as my research suggests. Here, the online learning environment is the platform for collaborative knowledge and skills development, that connects learners with practitioners and their business environment – namely the ‘real world’ – rather than replicating it, which online simulations and similar concepts typically feature.

Previous research provides various examples of implemented experiential online learning in problem-based learning (PBL) settings within virtual environments: in their recent article, Panlumlerts and Wannapiroon (2015) examine “cooperative problem-based learning activities to enhance cooperation skill in online environment” (p. 2184), which aim “to enhance cooperation skill in online environment” (p. 2188) through various methods based on PBL concepts. As for the online environment, they define information and communication technologies which are linked to the internet, such as websites, communication via email, conferencing as well as groupware such as group chat or mind-map sharing.

As “best practice”, Panlumlerts and Wannapiroon (2015) suggest a three-step model: an introduction, the activities concerned, and the conclusion of a lesson. Furthermore, they deduce that problem-based online learning was highly appropriate to promote cooperation skills, though they advise educational institutions to be well



prepared regarding its implementation within the online learning environment and the involvement of instructors and learners.

The original reason for conducting research in the field of problem-based online learning for Ng, Bridges, Law and Whitehill (2014) were space and time restrictions in their undergraduate course for speech/language pathology students. They confirmed Panlumlers and Wannapiroon's (2015) evaluation in terms of online PBL's effectiveness as they found out that there was no significant difference regarding the achieved learning outcomes between online and traditional student groups which were taught in class. Using Adobe Connect™ (a widely-deployed conferencing tool), the major obstacle that was observed was the system's lack of multilingual support, which was a problem for their native Chinese-speaking students and instructors.

Barber, King and Buchanan (2015) examined the relationship between PBL, authentic assessment and the role of the community in promoting learning in an online context. Even though the course was implemented in a formal learning setting, where instructors were responsible for students' assessment, interestingly, the power-relationship faded into the background: the teacher "learned" how to empower and motivate students, while particularly students with expertise in the field of technologies started to take the instructor's role within the community. They conclude that "problem based learning, authentic assessment and meaningful community are a powerful combination of tools that online instructors can use to provide students with effective digital pedagogy" (p. 65).

Bozalek, Gachago, Alexander, Watter, Wood, Ivala, and Herrington (2013) initially state that higher education graduates are ill equipped in terms of disciplinary knowledge and the authors propose authentic learning as an effective way to create complex learning and thereby address professional practice needs. In their research conducted in the South African higher education sector, they assessed how "emerging technologies" meet the requirements of authentic learning. In relation to "emerging technologies," Bozalek et al. (2013, p. 629) mention systems, tools and processes which foster collaboration (databases, social networks and referencing tools), knowledge collaboration (problem-based and case-based learning, virtual

discussions and communities, as well as information curation (blogs, portfolios and video streams). They used a survey which was sent out to 265 educators and selected 21 respondents for in-depth interviews in order to investigate their educational practice.

Regarding the objectives of my research, Bozalek et al.'s (2013) conclusion is relevant to the online environment as a basis for collaborative knowledge-creation within a broadly designed learning community:

“[t]his study shows that educators scoring highly on the use of emerging technologies to facilitate authentic learning are embedded in larger communities of practice, drawing from a cross pollination of ideas, foregrounding the importance of sharing and collaborating in a field that is constantly changing. The results also show that there is a symbiotic, rather than a simple cause-effect relationship between emerging technologies and transformative teaching and learning approaches like authentic learning” (p. 637)

In terms of practical implementation, Bozalek et al. (2013) underline the importance of a solid theoretical framework for online learning. The one on which they based their own research was originally provided by Herrington et al. (2010). The latter comprehensively discuss aspects of “authentic e-learning”, which they define as an “inventive and realistic task that provides opportunities for complex collaborative activities” (p. 1). They suggest that such forms of online collaboration meet the following criteria (p. 17):

1. “Provide authentic contexts that reflect the way the knowledge will be used in real life
2. Provide authentic activities
3. Provide access to expert performances and the modelling of processes
4. Provide multiple roles and perspectives
5. Support collaborative construction of knowledge
6. Promote reflection to enable abstractions to be formed

7. Promote articulation to enable tacit knowledge to be made explicit
8. Provide coaching and scaffolding by the teacher at critical times
9. Provide for authentic assessment of learning within the tasks.”

In a mobile learning context, Cochrane (2012) also suggests a “pedagogical integration of the technology into the course and assessment” (p. 125). Among other aspects, he also emphasises the supportive role of a learner community which, as he proposes, should be able to promote interaction within a social-constructivist paradigm. Therefore, he suggests, “[t]he use of a structured and sustained intentional community of practice around each project was found to facilitate these ontological shifts” (p. 125).

In the context of the teaching and assessment of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, which Griffin, McGaw and Care (2012) discuss as the educational answer to the technology-rich and dynamic knowledge society, they also focus on the creation of corresponding “knowledge-building environments” (p. 237). As such, they define “contexts supportive of the emergence and further development of new ideas – knowledge creation in organizations of all kinds”. In their opinion, knowledge-building environments should support the creativity that emerges as a result and which develops from multiple and various contexts linked to a common space.

Since 21<sup>st</sup> century skills include the use of a wide range of technologies applied in various environmental contexts and knowledge domains, these very technologies become a major part of the learning and assessment processes. Therefore, Griffin et al. (2012) suggest a “technology-supported reform” (p. 269) that also includes authentic and rich environments, where information sources and knowledge expertise are collected, formal as well as informal knowledge collaboration and networking takes place, while phenomena are provided that are difficult to simulate within traditional classrooms and students’ experiential autonomy is promoted to a high level.

To summarise, in addition to connectivist learning frameworks as discussed in this chapter, experiential learning and other social-constructivist approaches provide

valuable practical approaches to implement authentic online learning in real-world contexts. Similar to connectivist concepts, they underline the potential of authentic, collaborative, reflective, complex online learning environments involving multiple perspectives and simultaneous learning processes. However, as opposed to connectivist approaches, they suggest the integration of a solid underlying pedagogic framework which encompasses instructional roles and activities.

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## **2.5 Research Gap**

In this section, I would like to summarise the findings from the literature review and indicate the research gap (which is derived from practical potential), the theoretical perspective and its challenges. From this discussion, I will shape the research concern from which the practitioner research question is derived.

Practitioner-involvement in higher business education is promising. The point raised here is that practitioners are also valuable experienced holders of business knowledge and management skills may be an unexploited knowledge-treasure for business schools.

At the same time, student-engagement in real-world contexts – as provided by experiential learning – leads to effective skill development. Thus, approaches encompassing experiential learning through direct involvement of knowledge and experience holders from outside academia in formal business education may not only increase the relevance of practical business knowledge, it could also effectively promote business skills development through experiential hands-on learning in real-world contexts, through students' direct encounters with professionals, middle managers and senior executives.

Key concepts are identified in well-established practical forms of experiential learning as well as in recent online pedagogic concepts which may be, in a synergetic approach, integrated in formally-assessed business learning.

Such learning networks and online environments may be built towards practitioners' workplaces, opening opportunities for their direct engagement in various roles in

business learning, teaching and assessment. In the domain of business education, such online networks may be defined as a place

- where students build their personal learning network (PLE), which is individualised regarding their learning goals and process (Hollands and Tirthali, 2014) and based on their individual skills, knowledge and interests (Clarke, 2013), making their own connections, in and outside academia, varying hierarchically from top-down and bottom-up and quantitatively from one-to-many or many-to-many, and regarding the direction of the information flow (Kop, 2011);
- where participants can distribute and exchange knowledge across their own network of connections based on a pedagogy that describes practices for successfully establishing such networks (Downes, 2007) and where personal participation and engagement in various environmental contexts creates social meaning (Clarke, 2013);
- where formal teaching strategies and educators' role as facilitators are rather absent (Kop, 2011), instructors take a coordinative role in facilitating communication in order to interconnect learners' dispersed personal learning environments among each other (Skrypnyk et al., 2015), in a dynamic learning environment that is flexible enough to focus on both existing and newly emerging problems (Anderson & Dron, 2011);
- where new ideas are developed across institutional and organisational borders and within varied environmental contexts (Griffin et al., 2012), which provide numerous and rich possibilities for authentic, collaborative, reflective, complex online learning activities, involving multiple perspectives and simultaneous processes for participants (Bozalek et al., 2013).

However, a comprehensive synergetic approach is missing and already identified challenges from each single theoretical and practical concept need to be considered: the complex and dynamic business environment outside the institutional locus of

control, the question of how experiential learning with practitioner-involvement should be formally assessed and the challenge of institutional implementation and the cultivation and coordination of networked learning and assessment processes, to mention only a few crucial aspects.

Above all, from the contemporary perspective, the major research gap and practical challenge is how online learning environments and processes can be implemented within a traditional formal learning environment, where educators and students are connected in power-relationships and where learning objectives regarding knowledge, skills and competences and the underlying learning outcomes – which need to be formally assessed – are provided by business schools' curricula. This contradicts existing connectivist approaches (Downes, 2007), where instructional presence is diminished and learners' autonomy is underlined. Overall, a corresponding pedagogic role and concept for direct practitioner-involvement is missing and virtual learning environments need to be aligned with them in order to successfully operationalise a learning network.

At the same time, only little is known about practitioner's self-conception as participant in business education, and research on practitioner-involvement in learning and teaching focuses mainly on traditional classrooms. How business professionals may be involved in online learning settings in higher business education has only been randomly researched so far. Even though the potential of the internet to cover geographic distances and overcome time and schedule difficulties are obvious.

To summarise, even though each of the theoretically and practical approaches discussed has its challenges in terms of effectively promoting relevant and congruent learning in formally assessed business learning, there is much potential in overlaying and combining the approaches in a synergetic manner: Experiential online learning networks, business student-practitioner online networks as the synthesis of experiential, authentic and connectivist knowledge creation might offer an effective combined approach in order to responsively engage practitioners in higher business education. This is also confirmed by Bates (2014b, n.p.), who states that

“[t]he design of teaching often integrates different theories of learning. Communities of practice are one of the ways in which experiential learning, social constructivism, and connectivism can be combined, illustrating the limitations of trying to rigidly classify learning theories. Practice tends to be more complex”.

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### 3 Research Question

In this chapter, I will outline the aim and design of my thesis and define the research question to address the research gap and the practical challenges as derived from my literature review in Chapter 2. Furthermore, I am also going to outline the theoretical concepts which inform my data collection and analysis. At the end of this chapter I will explain my positionality as an internal researcher and how it might influence my interaction with participants and elaborate on ethical issues which need to be considered.

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#### 3.1 Research Objective and Design

The objective of my thesis research is to examine how business professionals involved in experiential online learning can effectively promote business students' practical management skills development. Furthermore, since my objective is to contribute to professional practice within my field of business education, the second goal is to guide business educators as to how to inculcate practical relevance in business learning, teaching and assessment through experiential online learning at an institutional level.

Therefore, I decided to implement a fully online course within an existing undergraduate business school marketing programme module within my own institution context (see **Institutional Context**, Section 4.2.1), where business practitioners from outside the institution would collaborate virtually with students over a period of four weeks. This is comprised of

- the virtual task, which would be conducted by separate student cohorts at several campuses within the institution, involving different business practitioners from the field of marketing and sales. In order to comply with the school's regulations, the learning outcomes would be assessed solely by the business educator while the entire virtual collaboration would be supervised by the administrators (see **Research Participants**, Section 4.3.2);
- the task would encompass two weeks of individual online activities in marketing analysis within the students' own business environment followed by



an asynchronous two week virtual discussion between external practitioners and students on the impact of students' findings on their company's marketing strategy. Collaboration and discussion would take place concerning the institution's existing online learning management system's discussion forum, which would not be extended in terms of its functionalities. The learning outcomes and the assessment criteria would be drawn from the module description as defined in the school curriculum and assessment framework (see **Unit of Analysis**, Section 4.2.2).

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### 3.2 Central Research Question and Associated Sub-Question

The central research question, which addresses the explanation of practitioners' impact on business students' practical management skills development, is defined as follows:

- How can practitioners engaged in experiential online learning effectively promote business students' practical management skills development?

In order to focus on the theoretical proposals' practicability at an institutional level, I defined the following associated sub-question:

- How can business educators provide practical relevance and congruence of formal business learning through experiential online learning at an institutional level?

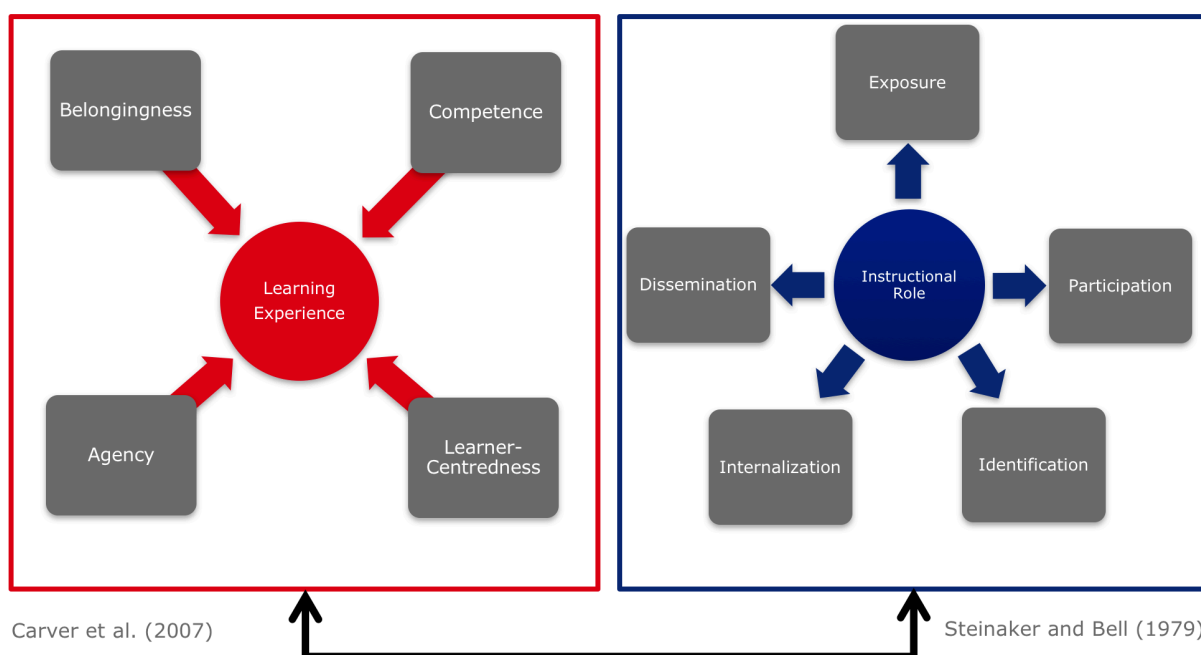
The first research question focuses on the pedagogic core processes, examining aspects regarding practitioners' instructional role and, in addition, on students' learning experiences and learning outcomes. Conditions regarding the online environment as well as its further development towards a learning community may be considered as issues for future study due to the specific focus of this research and the limited timeframe. The second research question is associated with the first, and conclusions will therefore be discussed based on the prior research outcomes. The chosen institutional perspective shall provide guidance for practical implementation within a business school context, not specifically for the research site.

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### 3.3 Underlying Theory

Perry and Jensen (2001, n.p.) state “[I]t is unlikely that any researcher could genuinely separate the two processes of induction and deduction”. They also refer to Richards (1993, p. 40, cited in Perry & Jensen, 2001, n.p.) who suggests that theory from previous research as well as propositions emerging from collected data should be considered simultaneously and that “it is impossible to go theory-free into any study”. Eisenhardt (1989) in particular underlines the benefits from prior theory regarding the direction of the data collection and data analysis process. This opinion is also shared by Perry (1998, p. 789), who mentions the “pivotal function” of theory and stresses that “pure deduction might prevent the development of new and useful theory” and proposes “that a blend of induction and deduction appears to be the most preferred position” (p. 791).

As theoretical grounding for my data collection, two frameworks are integrated by overlaying and including their theoretical criteria into my data collection templates: Carver et al.’s (2007) experiential e-learning that evaluates students’ learning experience as well as Steinaker and Bell’s experiential taxonomy (1979) that examines practitioners’ self-conception regarding their instructional role. I therefore consider that I have a powerful instrument to analytically relate practitioners’ instructional roles with the students’ experiential learning experience in their virtual environment. In the following section, I will elaborate how I will integrate the frameworks into my data collection process in order to address them. The concrete aspects examined will be presented in detail as part of the results presentation in Section 5.1. In the following sections, I will discuss the data collection frameworks from an instrumental perspective.

**Figure 1: Underlying Theoretical Frameworks**

### 3.3.1 Practitioners' Instructional Approaches and Behaviour

As theoretical framework, I will adopt Steinaker and Bell's (1979) experiential learning taxonomy, which I consider as a highly valuable vehicle to examine whether and how far practitioners as facilitators apply suitable instructional approaches in order to create and actively involve their students in meaningful interaction. An additional advantage of adopting Steinaker and Bell's framework is their highly operationalised categorisation, providing comprehensive qualitative descriptors, which may be quantitatively integrated, aggregated and analysed on different levels. Table 1 shows the categories into which Steinaker and Bell (1979) structured instructional processes and learning outcomes.

**Table 1: Experiential Learning Taxonomy**

Category	Tutor Role	Student Role	Activities
Exposure	Motivator	Attender	Resourcing
Identification	Catalyst	Explorer	Engaging and Constructing
Internalisation	Moderator	Experimenter	Interpreting, Restructuring, Inventing Meaning
Participation	Sustainer	Extender	Enriching, Applying, Trying out
Dissemination	Chair	Influencer	Reviewing, Evaluating, Extending

According to their framework (Steinaker & Bell, 1979), instructors effectively involve aligned with the growing level of learner competence in the role as

- “Motivator”, where they initially motivate students by illustrating the relevance of the objected learning outcomes;
- “Catalyst”, where they accelerate student development by providing an array of resources;
- “Moderator”, where they track, provide feedback and ask questions regarding a student’s learning processes and outcomes;
- “Sustainer”, where they positively empower students’ performance and ability to further adopt appropriate strategies and patterns; and,
- “Critiquor”, where they support students to extend and renew their experience within their individual context.

However, even though Steinaker and Bell’s (1979) taxonomy provides a valuable practical framework for interactional analysis, while due to its differing temporal context when it was first developed, it certainly shows its limitations and, therefore, needs to be re-contextualised: first, the learning environment will not be the traditional but the virtual classroom. This primarily affects the manner of collaboration and communication. Second, the facilitator will be a practitioner and the learning

context the students' practical real-world work environment. As a consequence, even though I will generally adopt the evaluation framework for my purpose, the specific individual criteria need to be revised in order to match the concrete learning arrangement.

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### **3.3.2 Students' Learning Experience**

The second integrated framework is Carver et al.'s (2007) experiential e-Learning, which has already been discussed in the literature review. At this point, I would like to briefly explain these concepts which, according to Carver et al. (2007, p. 251), when "taken together (...) form a unified whole that likely adds more value than the sum of each taken alone".

#### **Learner-Centredness**

EE-Learning is described as "learner-centric" by Carver et al. (2007, p. 251), which means that, as opposed to traditional classroom teaching, virtual learning requires a focus on the individual, thereby instructional practice should promote self-motivation and foster learners' goal-achievement.

#### **Agency**

Agency is described as a student's sense of being an autonomous learner, able to influence the situation, which in traditional teaching practice is not the case since the instructor feels (responsible) to be in control of student learning and development (Carver et al., 2007). Referring to Larson (2006), Carver et al. (2007) states that students' motivation to conquer learning depends mainly on their perception of themselves as agents of their activities, thereby becoming engaged with real challenges. As a consequence, the learning experience should be authentic and challenging in order to promote students' active engagement.

#### **Belongingness**

While the feeling of belongingness in traditional classrooms is provided by students and instructor's regular physical presence, in virtual spaces it is different. As stated by Carver (1997, p. 146), belongingness is shared among participants, who understand themselves as "members with rights and responsibilities, power and

vulnerability, and learn to act responsibly, considering the best interests of themselves, other individuals, and the group as a whole". The consequences of missing belongingness might be lower motivation, frustration or even failing to complete the course.

### **Competence**

A central aspect in Carver et al.'s (2007) concept – as well as crucial in the meaning of my research question – is the aspect of competence development which, in an experiential learning context, means "acquiring knowledge, mastering skills, and learning to apply what is learned to real-life situations" (p. 251). Therefore, prior knowledge and experience should not be isolated from student learning but linked to, and thus relevant for, their (work) life. This aspect is seen as particularly critical regarding knowledge integration and transfer.

A further aspect is the Center of Gravity (Carver et al., 2007), which is described as the focal point of action and balancing force, which help to build the strength and willingness to achieve learners' goals. Interpreted in this case study as personal empowerment and the centre of motivation, it is seen as a synergetic force of the above-described criteria on which self-driven, individually focused and effectively targeted learning activities are based.

However, Carver et al.'s (2007) valuable experiential e-learning taxonomy itself will not be included as a theoretical grounding for this study. The main reason is that the given instructional design as already defined by the institution (see Section 4.2.1.2) shows elements and characteristics from different levels: the authentic real-world problem-solving and decision process and the didactic implementation of the task do not match with their proposed forms of instructor-learner collaboration. However, this is neither intended nor possible: first, the task setting is put forward by the narrowly defined virtual assessment methods and – considering workload, prior knowledge and accessibility – the task has to be feasible for students as well as for the practitioners.

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### 3.4 Positionality as Internal Researcher

As stated by Bourke (2014, p. 2), “[t]he nature of qualitative research sets the researcher as the data collection instrument”. Thus, the research outcomes are the result of an interactive process between me as the researcher and the research participants, who shared their views and experience and shaped the findings and conclusions with me.

A core strategy for quality assurance in conducting qualitative research as an internal researcher is reflexivity. Berger (2015) defines reflexivity as a “process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome” (p. 220). Positionality includes personal characteristics, experience, beliefs and biases as well as ideological, theoretical and political stances. This subjectivity focuses on “how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affect data collection and analysis” (Pillow, 2003, p. 176).

As Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the organisation, I was known for my ambitious attitude and determined action regarding continuous innovation and change in terms of competitiveness and organisational growth. In fact, my entrepreneurial attitude was the motivation for the field of research and the decision to conduct the research within my own organisation.

Mauther and Doucet (2003) particularly emphasise the relevance of how we operationalise reflexivity in the practice of data analysis, since they are not neutral methods conducted within a “social vacuum” (p. 414) but, as in my case, are personally interrelated and emotionally connected to the institutional context.

During the research process, my own position with, and relation to, the institutional setting gradually changed: when I submitted my research proposal to the University of Liverpool and also when I started my data collection and analysis, I was the CEO of the organisation, observing and defending institutional interests as the head of the organisation. However, at the moment, when I resigned from my prior position and

my successors had been installed, I had already slipped into my new role perception as organisational advisor, characterised by a greater emotional distance and without vital interests in terms of future organisational development. In this new role, which outlasted the rest of my organisational engagement, I developed and implemented most of my research.

Berger (2015) underlines that a researcher's positionality may impact accessibility to participants and their willingness to share knowledge and experience with the researcher. In this case, even though I did not have a direct power relationship with the research participants involved, any particularly involved administrators as well as the educators were aware that they were part of an innovation project which, linked to my person, might result in new projects and organisational change. Thus, and particularly at the beginning when educators and administrators were initially contacted and afterwards came on board with the research project, I felt a tenor of willingness, curiosity and even enthusiasm to be part of an innovation project personally conducted by the CEO, one that might have further impact on organisational development.

However, after the data collection had been conducted, they developed a critical perspective and attitude, and our discussion turned into an open and reflective conversation which we finally regarded to be our common experience and learning: they also were confronted with students' opinions and feedback which were shared with them, but not with me. This turned out to be valuable for my interviews, since in terms of roles and relationships within the traditional classroom, I have always held a position as an outsider.

Regarding the practitioners, whom I did not know in person before my research project, despite my senior position within the organisation, I think I was rather seen as a researcher seeking to promote innovation and qualitative development in the organisation. In my opinion, this probably contrasted with the educators: for them, I might have rather taken the role of an internal expert who was able to provide further insights regarding the institution's policy, students' backgrounds, and organisational processes.



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### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

Since the research was conducted within my own institution, where at that time I was still CEO, I had to consider several ethical issues. Even though I did not hold a formal role within the internal learning organisation, which means I was not involved in the institution's teaching, learning or assessment processes and did not supervise any of the participating teachers, my formal position could have constrained administrators', educators' and students' participation. Another ethical aspect that needed to be considered was that practitioners – in particular those involved in online learning settings – might receive direct student feedback regarding their instructional behaviour or professional expertise and, therefore, could experience moderate stress.

Given this potential dynamic, invitations to potential participating administrators, educators, students and practitioners were sent out via the institution's community management, which is neither part of the learning organisation nor does it hold a power-relationship in relation to any of the participants. When inviting potential participants, it was emphasised that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that my role as an internal researcher was not linked to my position as the CEO of HSO Business School Switzerland. Participants were also assured that withdrawal from the project was possible at any time and that participation could be denied without a stated reason. While the 'Participant Information Sheet' as well as the 'Consent Form' was sent to administrators, educators and practitioners by the community manager via email, the same forms for students were provided online before having access to the online questionnaire as well as eight days before the submission deadline.

To minimize this risk of moderate stress for the practitioners involved, the online learning settings were monitored by me on a weekly basis and my personal contact information was provided to all participants so feedback could be passed to me at any time. Issues that threatened to escalate would have been brought to the attention of the Higher Education Dean immediately and, if necessary, to the Board which provided authorisation to conduct the research.

Regarding student data, all personal information collected was completely anonymised prior to aggregation and analysis, and participants were informed beforehand that their names would not be linked with the research materials and that they would remain anonymous throughout the study and would neither be identified or identifiable in any of the reports that resulted from the research. To ensure anonymisation of administrators, educators and practitioners' contributions, pseudonyms were used. In order to avoid identifiability of participants by other participants, information in my thesis, which may be linked to any of or through them, has been omitted, neutralized or left unassigned to the specific pseudonymized practitioner, educator, administrator or student.

To summarise, the aim of my thesis is to examine how business professionals involved in experiential online learning can effectively promote business students' development of practical management skills. The second goal is to guide business educators as to how to provide practical relevance to business learning, teaching and assessment through experiential online learning at an institutional level. Thereto, I decided to implement a fully online course within an existing undergraduate business school programme marketing module within my own institution. As a theoretical basis, two frameworks are integrated by adapting evaluation criteria into my data collection templates: Carver et al.'s (2007) experiential e-learning to evaluate students' learning experience and Steinaker and Bell's (1979) experiential taxonomy to examine practitioners' self-conception regarding their instructional role. Due to my position as the CEO, I had to consider several ethical issues. However, in the middle of my research process, my own position and relation to the institutional setting gradually changed due to my resignation. At the same time, participants developed a more critical perspective which, when combined, created a more open and reflective conversation.

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## **4 Methodology**

In this chapter, I would first like to elaborate on the theoretical perspective and the research methodology of my thesis research before I justify the choice of a case study approach. Next, I will illustrate the case study design, explaining why I chose an embedded single case design and detail the institutional context in which the study will be conducted. The next section will then define the unit of analysis within the case study design.

I outline the research plan and describe the research participants, providing a short definition of each group and a rationale for their participation. Next, I outline the data collection framework, where I describe each of the research methods, how they mesh, and explain which data will be collected.

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### **4.1 Theoretical Foundation**

The aim of my research is not to test a hypothesis. As outlined in Chapter 2, existing theoretical propositions need some improvement, thus the underlying concepts to operationalise research will remain ill-defined. Instead, my research aim is to examine the potential of practitioner involvement in higher business education in order to find out whether and how practitioner-engagement leads to effective management skills development and what it means for professional practice, and as a result provide guidance to business educators. Therefore, my research will be using an inductive process, where I aim to identify relations and patterns from my data from which similarities with other cases and improvement of theory might emerge.

I aim to construct new knowledge from my perspective as an internal researcher, interacting within the institutional environment and interrelated with its stakeholders and research participants. Thus, the epistemological stance will be constructivist (Gray, 2014).

Theoretical outcomes will be based on data collected through various methods and from different stakeholder perspectives, which will then be qualitatively analysed. Furthermore, my objective is to examine research participants' experiences. Thus, in

my study, educators, students, practitioners as well as administrators will be focused on as individuals and my theoretical and practical research outcomes will be based on their views and perspectives (Gray, 2014): through triangulation the research outcomes will become more robust and convergence will be demonstrated by several independent interpretations and/or sources of evidence.

According to Yin (2009) there are three conditions which need to be considered regarding the choice of a research method: first, the type of research question; second, the degree of control the researcher has over the examined event; and, third, the temporal focus, namely, whether the research focuses on contemporary or historical events. The research question as well as the associated sub-question will serve as a basis for “how” questions in my thesis, which generally favour the conducting of a case study (Yin, 2009). In particular the second criterion, the level of control, indicates the use of a case study design: the exploratory endeavour I seek to examine could not be controlled as an experiment where participants’ behaviour could be directly and systemically manipulated by the examiner. Furthermore, case studies are suitable for research endeavours where the understanding of the contemporary real-life phenomenon is closely connected to the environmental conditions, and where the boundaries between the contextual conditions such as the learning environment and the researched phenomenon, namely practitioners’ involvement in business learning, are not clearly definable (Yin, 2009). Thus, for my research, I chose the case study approach, which encompasses the perspectives, interests and experience of various participants, namely practitioners, educators and students, as research leverage points based on a multiplicity of sources of evidence (Yin, 2009).

The case study design also reflects the broad explorative research goal to conceptually examine experiential online learning’s potential for effective management skills development as defined in the central research question. The research outcomes are intended to provide theoretical propositions to enhance the effective involvement of practitioners in higher business education, while the associated research question focuses on guiding business educators and administrators regarding practical implementation. Outcomes will therefore propose

organisational development processes for business schools in general as well as outlining recommendations for future research.

In order to draw conclusions towards theoretical conceptualisation, I chose a system-thinking approach. The reason for choosing this particular approach is based on my own stances and preferences as well as on the characteristics of the research and the intended research outcomes. As discussed by Roberts (2007), the system thinking approach goes back to Wiener (1948), and has also been later adopted in higher education governance research. As Birnbaum (1989, p. 240) has explained:

“[c]olleges and universities are inventions that arise through the interactions of non-linear, dynamic systems of social norms, hierarchical structures, contending preferences, and cognitive biases and limits. Institutions are defined by the elements that compose these systems, and by the patterns in which these elements are loosely or tightly coupled”.

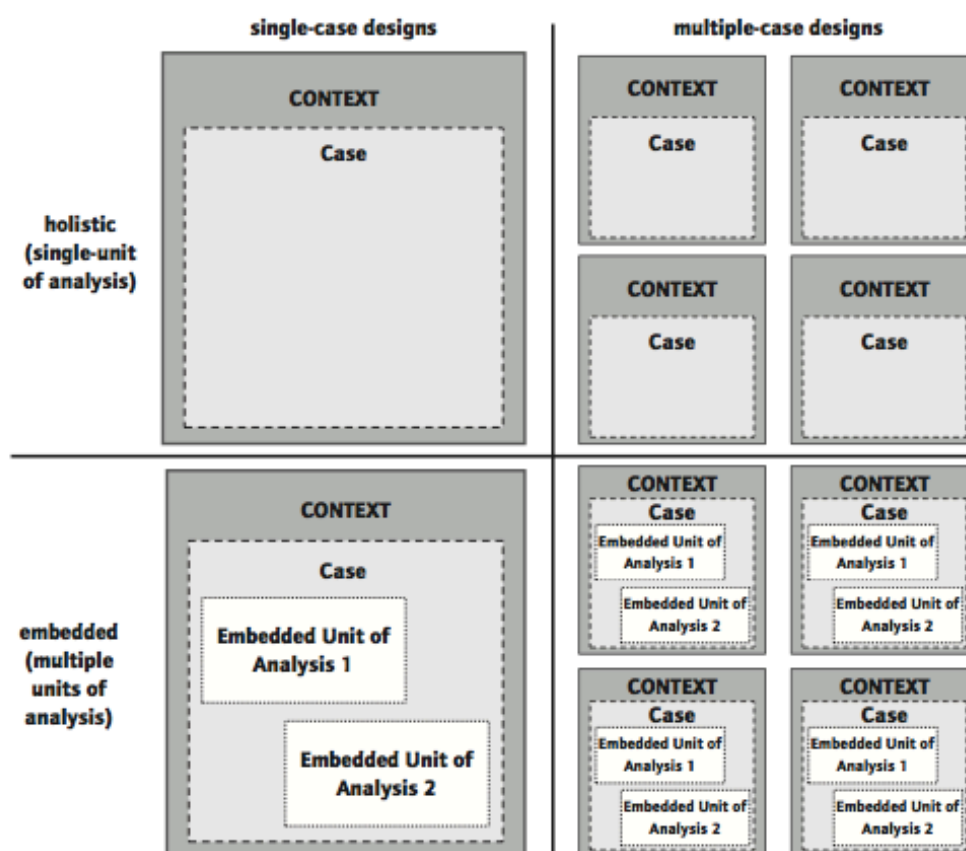
As Birnbaum continues, “cybernetic principles can be used to understand how the often conflicting processes of these dynamic systems are coordinated” (p. 240).

First, in terms of my research aim and intended outcomes, I consider a cybernetic perspective as an effective research approach: the interrelations within an institutional context are multi-layered and complex, while its temporal and mechanic connections differ in terms of their dynamics. In particular the associated sub-question, which seeks to provide effective practitioner involvement at institutional level, needs to adopt this variety of characteristics in interactions, norms, structures and preferences (Birnbaum, 1989). Second, from my own perspective as an educational researcher, the approach is my preferred analytical strategy, I have routinely performed this strategy in my role as a management educator when applying similar cybernetic approaches (Ulrich & Probst, 1995; Vester & Hessler 1980), as well as educational manager and leader in my own strategic planning and decision-making processes.

The reason for not choosing an experimental research design or an ethnographic approach such as participant observation has already been explained in this chapter: among other issues regarding experimental research, I discussed the lack of control over participants' behaviour. In terms of participant observation, I emphasised that my research focuses on personal construction of individual experiences and the necessity for in-depth research methods in order to gather them. Participant observation focuses on the research site, with a focus on the culture and its behavioural interrelations (Gray, 2014) which does not reflect my research objectives.

However, I also considered an action research approach (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; McNiff & Whitehead, 2005), and a hybrid action research case study approach (Molineux, 2013; Rovio, Arvinen-Barrow, Weigand, Eskola, & Lintunen, 2012). Even though I will focus on an organisational challenge which I directly encountered in my organisation or professional practice, the experiential-online approach of practitioner involvement is completely new to the organisation. Therefore, the research aim is not to introduce change into an established practice (Gray, 2014), as is typical for action research projects. Rather, I will examine potentials in order to develop theoretical and practical propositions and guidance.

Yin (2009) further defines four characteristics of case study designs. As illustrated below, in his matrix he differentiates single-case designs from multiple-case designs as well as holistic from embedded designs – and the synthesis of the two dimensions.

**Figure 2: Case Study Matrix**

Reprinted from *Case study research: Design and methods* (p. 46), by R. K. Yin, 2009, Los Angeles, CA: Sage. Copyright (2009) by Sage.

When I started my thesis journey, my aim was to examine varied and independent learning settings, where practitioners collaborated with students in different roles and forms of interaction. Referring to Yin's (2009) case study design matrix, this case study would have been designed as a holistic multiple-case design: each of the varied forms of student-practitioner interaction would have developed multiple cases in the same institutional context.

Yin (2009) elaborates on the potential of multiple-case designs, underlining the potential to provide more robust and compelling research outcomes. Multiple-cases are considered as a strong basis for robust theory building, extension or simply explanation-building rooted in various empirical evidence (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin 2009): in an inductive multiple-case design, each

of the cases independently serves as experiment, where emerging theory is built on replication logic which confirms or confounds emerging perceptions. As proposed by Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2009), through case-replication, emerging patterns from one case are sought in another in order to provide evidence.

However, for two reasons, only one instructional conception will be implemented and conducted within this case study: first, because of the limited timeframe of the thesis research, which was additionally shortened by my decision to leave the organisation. Also, a parallel conducting of varied cases is not an option, due to the high degree of student involvement generated by each case and thus the extensive organisational, communication and coordination work for programme directors, programme managers and system administrators. Since there is no such role concept implemented in the institution's learning management system, all information and coordination processes need to be executed manually, which will be quite a time burden, particularly for the responsible programme director and the system administrator: this concerns the opening of the personal account, granting access rights to the asynchronous discussion forum, a short instructional session for the practitioner, separate instruction of educators and many other special efforts in order to organise and coordinate the specific learning and assessment arrangement.

Moreover, a further reason for conducting only one particular instructional design is found in the compliance with the formal assessment regulation of the research site: in formally assessed learning, the intended learning outcomes are defined by the curriculum, giving little space for interpretation, and all students should have equal challenges and possibilities to fulfil their assessments. This limits the creative frame and I am aware that it is not possible to vary and conduct further cases based on prior research outcomes, but that the possible forms would need to be narrowed to existing forms according to the school's regulations as illustrated in Section 4.2.1.2.

As a consequence, the case study could not be conducted as a multiple-case design, where each of the classes and/or instructional designs would have formed a separate case, but rather it was designed as a single-case design with embedded units of analysis, as illustrated in Figure 3. As explained by Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007),



Mariotto, Pinto Zanni and de Moraes (2014) and Yin (2009), single-case designs are typically applied to conduct research in cases where unusual research opportunities open up new possibilities to conduct research. Such is the case with the research presented in this thesis, where the chance to undertake my research was due to my position and relation to the institution. As further discussed by Mariotto et al. (2014, p. 361), in such a context single cases can create the opportunity to create even more complex theory, “because single-case researchers can fit their theory exactly to the many details of a particular case”.

However, despite the above-mentioned advantage of single-cases and confirmation from Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, p. 25) that inductive theory building from case studies “involves using one or more cases to create theoretical constructs, propositions and/or midrange theory”, single case designs certainly have their limitations regarding their range for generalisation. As noted by Siggelkow (2007, p. 23),

“one will not be able to say, ‘You should believe my theory that A leads to B, because I show you an example here.’ That is asking too much of a single case study, or even of a few cases. The theory should stand on its own feet. One needs to convince the reader that the conceptual argument is plausible and use the case as additional (but not sole) justification for one’s argument”.

May (2011) suggests that the common purpose of case studies is to contribute “to the sum of total knowledge” (p. 221) and emphasises the different purpose and range of each case design regarding the potential for a generalising or particularising focus. As further explained by reference to Yin (1981) and Mitchell (1983), generalisation is not based on the representativeness of the case but on the “analytical generality” which means that single cases matter on their “theoretical reasoning” in order to generate generalisable conclusions (p. 223).

Here, the case study is seen as a detailed investigation, where general principles may be identified (May, 2011). Even though single cases are often criticised for their

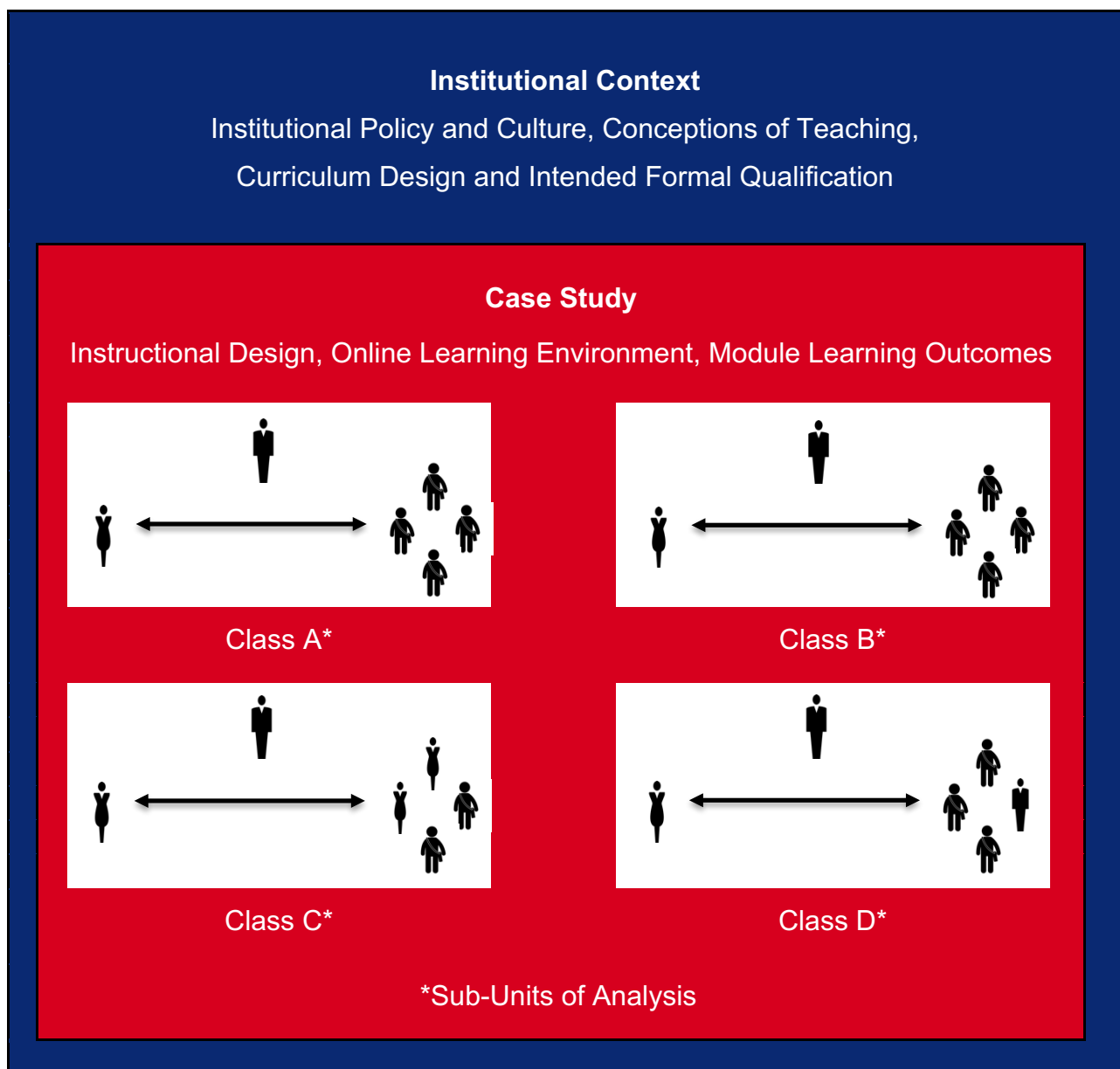
lack of reliability, validity and generalisation as well as the risk of bias, May (2011) underlines the focus on singularity and particularisation, where the “emphasis on description and understanding replaces one on explanation” with the aim “to present a rich portrayal of a single setting to inform practice, establish the value of the case” (p. 224).

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## **4.2 Case Study Design**

In order to address the central research question, namely “How can practitioners engaged in experiential online learning effectively promote business students’ practical management skills development?”, the virtual student-practitioner interaction programme will build the unit of analysis, while each of the separate classes involved will represent sub-units of analysis, which will be the basis for the data collection framework by focussing on the practitioner’s instructional role and the student’s learning experience and learning outcomes.

Before I describe the case study design in-depth, Figure 3 illustrates the embedded case study design. The institutional contextual factors, such as the institutional policy and culture, conceptions of teaching as well as the curriculum design and the intended formal qualification of the bachelor programme which the case will be linked to, are explained in Section 4.2.1, while the case study as the larger unit of analysis is outlined in Section 4.2.2.

**Figure 3: Case Study Design**

#### 4.2.1 Institutional Context

In order to illustrate the institutional context, the policy and organisational culture shall be further described at an institutional level. In addition, I will elaborate the overarching instructional concept in the Department of Higher Education and the curriculum design within the Bachelor of Applied Science (BASc) programme where the case study would be conducted as well as the intended learning outcomes within the marketing course.

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#### **4.2.1.1 Institutional Policy and Culture**

Even though HSO was founded in 1954, it has only expanded its operations beyond Zurich from 2007 onwards. The institution's rapid growth was driven by shared values such as its dedication to innovation and a consequent orientation to the educational market manifested in the aim to provide strongly practice-oriented education on the lifelong education journey.

The institution's 'tribes' are more vocational than academic, even though HSO has recently successfully established a master's programme in an executive format. Due to its origins in Swiss dual-track education, HSO's faculty often have a practical background combined with an instructional qualification.

The institution's higher education programs are embedded in Switzerland's diverse educational landscape of professional and university programs. On the tertiary level of higher education, colleges of higher education usually provide dual-track programs with a labour market focus, which means that learning is centred on professional competencies in a part-time format. Beside traditional research-intense universities, for over 20 years, universities of applied sciences offer practice-oriented university-level education and engage in applied research in various practical disciplines of applied sciences.

In Switzerland, HSO is accredited as college of higher education, offering a variety of professional education and training programs. Furthermore, the business school holds an ACBSP accreditation for its Baccalaureate programs, namely the Bachelor of Business Administration BBA and Bachelor of Applied Sciences BASc as well as for its Executive Master of Business Administration EMBA program. In the meantime, the BBA program is dual degree program, jointly offered with the Hamburger HFH University of Applied Sciences in a Bologna-compliant study format.

My prior research on cultural aspects within HSO revealed a strong developmental and managerial culture within the organisation (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008): it is mainly driven by corporate goals, exhibits encompassing controlling instruments to measure their achievement and is focused on students' career perspective and

potential to become successful and responsible professionals. Thereto, the organisation improves continuously and develops new programmes and services that promote personal and organisational growth. Its shared value, therefore, is based on an openness and readiness to move and change, which is reflected in a fluid organisation that continuously adopts newly emerging external and internal requirements and potentials alongside agile organisational members who permanently reshape their set of activities and responsibilities as a response to ever-changing circumstances. As an employer, HSO attracted mainly young professionals and, as a consequence, the average age of administrative and managerial staff is below 30 years old while most educators are part-time faculty and otherwise rooted in professional practice.

Thus, in terms of the innovation project as conducted in this case study, the willingness and eagerness to drive innovation and change was a stimulating factor from the very beginning. Even though educators are probably more sceptical regarding the pedagogic benefits of practitioner involvement and some of the programme managers fear additional efforts in terms of their already briskly scheduled planning and communication processes, the mood was positive and – in the case of the higher education dean and the responsible administrators – even enthusiastic.

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#### **4.2.1.2 Curriculum Design**

The curriculum of the Bachelor of Applied Sciences (BSc) programme (HSO, 2015c), in which the case study was conducted, encompasses a total of 54 courses in 13 modules including a capstone project. The programme is usually completed within 3 years part-time.

**Table 2: BSc Curriculum**

Modules	Workload (Learning Hours)			
	Classroom	Online	Self-Study	Assessment
Management	180	20	160	72
Marketing	108	8	100	59
Project Management	56	0	60	27
Process Management	52	0	60	6
HR Management	108	0	84	27
Accounting	148	0	234	9
Finance	112	0	120	30
Supply Chain Management	60	4	90	15
IT Management	32	16	51	12
Organisational Developm.	40	0	55	56
Quality Management	40	4	48	15
Business English	84	20	122	9
Capstone Project	12	0	0	288
<b>Total</b>	<b>1032</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>1184</b>	<b>625</b>

As shown above, a peculiarity of the curriculum is that 625 hours of the total workload is conducted outside the traditional classroom: 8 years ago, when I was named Director and became responsible for establishing HSO's higher education programmes across German-speaking Switzerland, we decided to introduce a new learning approach. Instead of written exams in class requiring personal attendance of students, the majority of assessments are conducted within professional practice. Thereto, four regular approaches are applied (HSO, 2015b):

- Virtual Discussions, usually conducted in preparation or post-processing of classroom learning, where students reflect on what they learn in relation to their own professional context. This kind of assessment is often discussed with peers from the same cohort;
- Action Tasks, which are moderately complex task, where a practical concept is applied to students' professional practice. Such tasks are always based on theoretical concepts and practical frameworks which have been previously

introduced in class;

- Action Projects, which are team assessment. As opposed to Action Tasks, which take one month and are conducted as individual work, Action Projects mean team work and usually take 3 months to submit;
- The Capstone Project in the third year of studies which is either conducted as a single or group task and encompasses a complex application to the student's professional environment or field of interest linked to the curriculum, conducted during a full semester beside regular classes.

As a consequence, HSO students are usually experienced in using online learning tools such as discussion forums and in working collaboratively in online learning environments. However, since the study would be conducted in first year cohorts and it is possible to start four times a year, around one fourth of the students would not be familiar with HSO's virtual learning environment while the majority would have already undertaken at least one and up to three courses.

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#### **4.2.1.3 Conceptions of Teaching**

The conceptions of teaching are aligned with the curriculum. According to the student handbook (HSO, 2015b), this means that students usually self-prepare their lessons through their readings, less complex exercises and reflective tasks with regard to their professional environment and experience. Lecturers, who often have professional experience in their field of teaching, are required to use their face-to-face time to focus on the impartment of practical skills and knowledge in order to prepare students for their assignments outside the classroom. This mainly happens through case studies or tasks where again the student's own professional environment is included as the object of learning.

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#### **4.2.1.4 Intended Formal Qualification**

The formal qualification intended after successful completion of the program is defined by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI), which is the accreditation body for the type of higher education programmes offered

by HSO. Referring to the approved curriculum (SERI, 2008), after three years of study students are taking managerial responsibility and leadership in operational management in companies of all sizes, in business as well as in support processes. They are able to promote change within a business environment and its economic, social and ecological context in order to sustain corporate development. Thereby, graduates are able to provide practical solutions within complex and dynamic business situations based on their general managerial, leadership and communications competencies and – as opposed to graduates from traditional universities and universities of applied sciences – programme alumni are more practical- than research-oriented. Regarding their overall competencies in the field of marketing, graduates should be able to implement marketing concepts derived from corporate strategies and to introduce the activities in their own professional environment.

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#### **4.2.2 Unit of Analysis**

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##### **4.2.2.1 Online Learning Environment**

HSO's online learning environment can be compared with common online learning management systems. Educators and students have access to virtual discussion forums, integrated file upload functions for assignments and shared files between educator and students and for student collaboration. Other than that, the virtual campus is used as a student information system, providing the class schedule, a grade book as well as general information from the school and programme management at each HSO campus. In order to ease the feedback process from educators to students, once uploaded, assignments are automatically released to markers for grading and feedback.

In the context of this study, it is important to note that there would be no supporting functions involving external participants. The case of practitioner-involvement, as conducted in this study, was neither functionally implemented nor reflected in the overarching role concept. In order to on-board the external practitioners, a new role needed to be defined within the learning management system in order to assign the



necessary accession permissions to the functions needed within the virtual discussion forums.

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#### **4.2.2.2 Module Learning Outcomes**

The study was conducted within the first marketing course which students usually take at the beginning of their study. Prior knowledge or professional experience in the field of study are not expected. The intended learning outcomes aim to provide basic knowledge and orientation. According to the module plan (HSO, 2015a), at the end of the course participants are able to adopt major marketing instruments into their sales planning and operations.

Drawn from the school curriculum, professional competence is defined as follows: “Students are able to set clear objectives for a defined market, they can explain the composition of a marketing mix including the marketing instruments as well as the composition of the sub mix ‘Product’” (HSO, 2015a, p. 1). The total of 91 learning hours were assigned to the entire module, therefrom 44 hours of presence hours, 44 hours of self-study, such as literature review and preparation and post-processing of presence hours, as well as 3 hours of virtual discussion within the institution’s assessment framework (see Section 4.2.1.2), which were budgeted for the course examined by this case study. Before the online course started, students underwent 16 lessons of marketing in class and 18 hours of self-directed learning.

For the task as examined within this case study, the following intended learning outcomes are drawn from the curriculum (HSO, 2015a, p. 1):

“Students are able to

- A) name the categorical structure of the marketing mix with its classic 4 sub mixes and explain it exemplary;
- B) name the three characteristics levels of products (services) and derive the customer benefit therefrom;
- C) formulate marketing goals considering the market’s circumstances and respective target areas”.

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#### **4.2.2.3 Instructional Design**

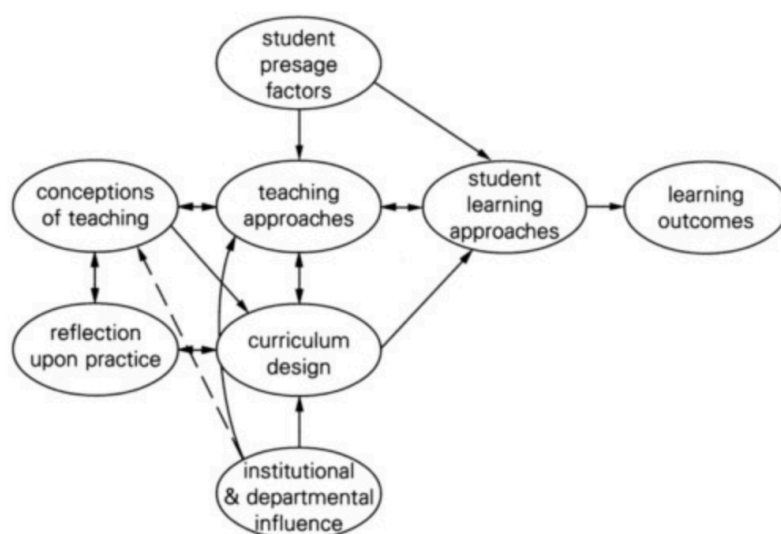
In strict alignment to the above-mentioned learning outcomes, I designed a task collaboratively with the Dean and programme directors in order to assure the quality and validity of the student assessment. This means that the task complied with the institution's assessment framework in terms of length, workload and assessed outcomes and its structure and process, which needed to follow one of the defined examination methods as illustrated in Section 4.2.1.2. Thereto, we constructed an authentic generic real-world challenge encompassing each of the learning goals, considering student prior theoretical knowledge and accessibility of necessary information within students' organisations.

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#### **4.2.3 Data Collection Framework and Instruments**

For embedded case study designs, Scholz and Tietje (2002) propose an "organized and structured" (p. 30) framework based on three levels: while the first level encompasses the case as a whole, the second level demonstrates "a conceptual model of the real world" (p. 31). They consider this level epistemologically as crucial in order to contribute to the conceptualisation of the case. Finally, the third level represents the synthetical-analytical level, where research data are separated and structured for further investigation, combined with prior theory.

As for the conceptual framework for Scholz and Tietje's (2002) second level, the evaluation and data collection framework was adapted from a holistic model of learning and teaching provided within Kemper's (2000) action research project approach, which built the basis for my data collection.

**Figure 4: Kember's Model of Learning and Teaching**

Reprinted from *Action learning, action research: Improving the quality of teaching and learning* (n. p.), by D. Kember, 2000, London: Routledge. Copyright 2000 by David Kember.

Even though my research would not be conducted within an action research framework, I considered Kember's (2000) conceptual framework as a solid and widely recognized theoretical base for my data collection, since it is broad enough to comprise the institutional context and suitable to focus the instructional design examined within the case.

Furthermore, as stated by Dooley (2002, as cited in Gray, 2014, p. 266), "[c]ase studies typically combine data collection methods from a wide variety of sources including archives, interviews, surveys and participant observation". Kember's framework encompasses a wide organizational range, shows a practical emphasis and provides various evaluation and data collection instruments, all of which are considered to be important for two obvious reasons: first, due to the broadly defined central research question and the strong practical focus of the associated sub-question with the aim to improve institutional practice.

Data collection was processed through the Student Online Survey (see Section 4.3.3.1), Student Learning Outcomes Assessment (see Section 4.3.3.2), Practitioner, Educator and Administrator Interviews (see Section 4.3.3.3) and the Practitioner-Student Interaction Analysis (see Section 4.3.3.4). As discussed by Yin (2009), an

integration of both quantitative and qualitative data is a strong and beneficial analytical strategy for conducting case studies. Even though the qualitative analysis would build the central part of this case study, quantitative data may be important to explain the research outcomes.

Therefore, the chosen analytical approach in my case study is based on a sequential explanatory design, as proposed by Ivankova, Creswell and Stick (n.d.): in this mixed-methods design, in each of the conducted cases, quantitative would be followed by qualitative data collection and analysis (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010) and then connected to the intermediate stage of my case study, before the central core categories and their interrelations (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) within the cases and between the cases are identified, analysed and discussed.

In the first quantitative phase in each case, quantitative data derived from the Student Online Survey (see Section 4.3.3.1) as well as from the Student Learning Outcomes Assessment (see Section 4.3.3.2) would be collected and first analysed before conducting the Practitioner and Educator Interviews (see Section 4.3.3.3). In this way, I would be able to focus my interview questions in terms of practitioners' instructional experience and educators' perspectives based on the quantitative results related to students' learning experiences and the performance gained in the previous stage. However, due to the tight schedule and the fact that my possibilities for data collection excluded direct personal student contact, I was not able to conduct further investigation based on the initial quantitative results in terms of students' experiences, which would certainly have been rich in valuable insights.

**Table 3: Data Collection Framework**

	<i>Student Online Survey</i>	<i>Student Learning Outcomes Assessment</i>	<i><u>Practitioner, Educator and Administrator</u> Interviews</i>			<i>Practitioner- Student Interaction Analysis</i>
			<u>Pr</u>	<u>Ed</u>	<u>Ad</u>	
Student Learning Experience	x		x	x		
Student Learning Outcomes	x	x	x	x		
Practitioner Instructional Approaches	x		x	x		x
Institutional Context					x	

### 4.3 Conducted Case Study

Between 6th February and 8th April 2015, the four cases were conducted involving:

- 86 students in the Bachelor of Applied Science (BASc) programme from four HSO campuses in Bern, Lucerne, Thun and Zurich;
- 4 educators assigned to the cohorts on the four campuses;
- 4 external practitioners from the field of marketing, sales and communications;
- 2 administrators, which are responsible for the BSc programme at HSO.

**Table 4: Time Schedule**

Classes	Period from to		Student #	February				March				April	
				07.	14.	21.	28.	07.	14.	21.	28.	04.	11.
				- 13.	- 20.	- 27.	- 06.	- 13.	- 20.	- 27.	- 03.	- 09.	- 16.
Class A	06.02.	05.03.	19										
Class B	2015	2015	24										
Class C	13.02.	12.03.	21										
Class D	2015	2015	22										

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Individual Activities
Practitioner Discussion

### 4.3.1 Virtual Task

The chosen assessment method was a virtual discussion (see Section 4.2.1.2), mainly due to the limited workload and length and, thus, time burden for practitioners' involvement. The task was divided into two parts, namely individual activities and the practitioner discussion: before the practitioner discussion started, students had to provide a short definition of their employer's relevant market (e.g. the market for electronic toys for children between 6 to 12 years old) and the link to their company website. They also selected a strong competitor to their own company and provided the link to its website. In the first part, they were asked to search for the competitor's product or service, thereby:

- 1a) identifying product/service differentiating criteria;
- 1b) assigning it to the relevant marketing submix; and
- 1c) choosing one for further analysis and providing a short summary of the relevant differentiation aspects.

Based on that, students were then asked to

- 1d) draw a potential customer benefit before they;
- 1e) elaborated on potential marketing strategies to increase their own company's competitiveness.

In Part 2, students began the practitioner-interaction as a virtual discussion. Their initial contribution was given feedback by the practitioner followed by a forum discussion that took place over two weeks.

Referring to Bloom's revised taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002), the intended learning outcomes and the linked subtasks can be assigned cognitive processes and knowledge dimensions as follows:

**Table 5: Task's Knowledge and Cognitive Process Dimension**

<b>Competence</b>	<b>Knowledge Dimension</b>	<b>Cognitive Process Dimension</b>
Students are able to		
A) name the categorical structure of the marketing mix with its classic 4 sub mixes and explain it exemplary	Conceptual	Understand
B) name the three characteristics levels of products (services) and derive the customer benefit therefrom	Conceptual	Evaluate
C) formulate marketing goals considering the market's circumstances and respective target areas	Conceptual	Create

On a processual level, there is a close similarity to what Carver et al. (2007) defined as 'Online Conversation', where instructors are involved in a discussion for an educational purpose, questions are usually prompted by the instructor and answered by the learner. 'Meaningful Online Conversations' go beyond this, since the interaction derives from the (professional) context of the student and is not provided by the instructor. This was also part of the instructional design in this case study. However, as opposed to the definition provided by Carver et al. (2007), the conversational interaction was not to be initiated by students based on prior experience or needs but by the instructor.

Since the learning object was the student's own professional environment, as also argued by Carver et al. (2007, p. 250) I also considered that the "interactions at this level have heightened experiential value as they are based on students' own experiences". The fact that the organisational challenge derived from students' authentic real world contexts as employees and that it was not specifically constructed for learning purposes corresponds to the definition of 'Direct Experience/Action Learning' (Carver et al., 2007). However, the problem was not drawn directly from students' professional contexts: it was rather generic and induced by the assessed intended learning outcomes according to the curriculum and not, as underlined by Carver et al. (2007, p. 250), "planned and initiated by the students". Moreover, as characterised by Carver et al. in relation to 'Problem Based/Service Learning' on the next and lower level in their taxonomy, it was "planned and initiated by the instructor" (p. 250).

However, even though the task for this case could not be originally designed in such a way that research objectives and potentials would have been addressed in an ideal manner, the unique research opportunity provided by the institution opened the possibility to conduct research in a formally-assessed virtual learning setting, encompassing various levels of knowledge and skills. Following Carver et al.'s (2007) argument that

"[t]he role of experience is limited to recalled experiences at the lower levels of the taxonomy while direct experience is involved at the higher levels. In that sense, the lower levels of this taxonomy may be considered as "passive" elearning while the higher levels may be considered as "active" elearning" (p. 250).

The task setting encompassed elements from all levels through to the highest level where retention and transfer are promoted, which, according to Mayer (2002), means the ability to remember and to use what was previously learned at a later time when the knowledge needs to be activated in order to solve new learning challenges and practical problems.



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### **4.3.2 Research Participants**

The selection of participants derives from the research question as presented in Section 3.1, namely students, educators and practitioners. The selection criteria are explained in the following sections.

Potential participants were invited by a member of HSO's community management, who does not hold a formal position within the learning organisation and does not occupy a power-relationship in relation to any of the participants, which could have imposed coercion.

In the following sections, I will describe the selection criteria for the invited participants, describing the invitation process as well as other information relevant for this study.

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#### **4.3.2.1 Practitioners**

The four practitioners who participated in the case study were previously invited by HSO's community management. In order to ease access, due to their loyalty towards HSO's programmes and services, alumni from HSO's Bachelor of Applied Science (BASc) programme in General Management and Marketing and Sales as well as from the Executive Masters of Business Administration (EMBA) programme were invited to participate in the research project.

In order to be selected, they had to be either a middle or senior manager in the field of marketing, sales and/or communications from Swiss-German companies of various sizes. In order to count as a 'practitioner', they should not have been employed as full- or part-time faculty in business education programmes and should not have undertaken any programmes in order to enhance pedagogical skills nor demonstrated any teaching experience within the context of a business educational institution. Practitioners' educational and experiential management profiles are presented as follows (in order to maintain anonymity, the following list does not correspond to the numeration in the findings and conclusion chapters):

**Table 6: Practitioner Profiles**

<b>Practitioner</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Professional Experience</b>	<b>Current Position</b>
Practitioner A	MBA	26 years of professional experience, of which 26 years in the field of marketing and sales	Senior Manager
Practitioner B	BASc	24 years of professional experience, of which 12 years in the field of marketing and sales	Middle Manager
Practitioner C	BASc	16 years of professional experience, of which 13 years in the field of marketing and sales	Middle Manager
Practitioner D	MBA	18 years of professional experience, of which 12.5 years in the field of marketing and communications	Senior Manager

#### 4.3.2.2 Educators

I identified the potential participating educators based on their academic or professional qualification criteria defined by the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs for business schools' faculty members (ACBSP, 2013). This means that they:

“hold a master’s degree in a business-related field and professional certification (e.g., CPA, CDP, CFM, CMA, PHR., etc.), appropriate to his or her assigned teaching responsibilities (...), hold a master’s degree and have extensive and substantial documented successful teaching experience in the area of assigned teaching responsibilities, and demonstrate involvement in meaningful research directly related to the teaching discipline (...) hold a master’s degree and have five or more

years of professional and management experience in work directly related to his or her assigned teaching responsibilities” (p. 69).

In fact, in the chosen marketing module, there were ten educators who fulfilled the above-described criteria and were invited. Only four of them were selected due to the chronological arrangement of their courses, considering organisational aspects such as availability and the time burden of the programme director for on-boarding them, or practitioners’ own time flexibility and availability during the period the online modules were pre-scheduled.

At this point, it is important to say that all selected educators as well have a professional background in the field of marketing, sales or communications. This was not intended, but, as explained in this chapter, HSO is a higher education institution with a professional focus, which means that education is oriented towards practice competence and labour market needs. Thus, most educators on bachelor level are part-time lecturers. The marketing educators in this case study all show relevant professional experience between 12 and 26 years and average employments as lecturers between 15% and 60%. As a consequence, lectures at HSO in a functional field at bachelor level are usually characterized by a strong vocational character, where educators link theory to practice by enriching learning in class with authentic examples which are drawn from their own professional experience and/or focussing on outcome-oriented competences and practical processes.

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#### **4.3.2.3 Students**

The selected student cohorts were enrolled in modules as part of the institutions’ BASc part-time programmes on the HSO campuses in Berne, Lucerne, Thun and Zurich. The cohorts were selected by me based on two criteria: first, the business educator who was responsible for the class had to comply with the selection criteria as defined in Section 4.3.2.2, and second, the thematic and time coincidence of the study and assessment plans had to match with the intended learning setting examined within this research project. The BASc programme is offered to part-time students. Thus, students’ involvement in evaluations on how the examined learning settings effectively promote their practical management skills development is

considered to be particularly informative, since they are usually junior professionals and middle managers themselves.

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#### **4.3.2.4 Administrators**

The administrators who were invited to participate in the research project were proposed by me, based on their organisational responsibility and involvement in academic and pedagogical development of learning, teaching and assessment in the institution's BASc programme. Because of ethical considerations, the higher education Dean could not be involved, since I has a direct power relationship with him. However, even though the Dean could have added a strategic perspective on the field of research, the administrators are directly involved in the programme's delivery, mainly interacting with the different branches and were therefore the guarantors for direct access to the learning organisation.

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### **4.3.3 Data Collection**

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#### **4.3.3.1 Student Online Survey**

The student online survey contained four sections where students were interrogated regarding their presage factors, that includes their prior knowledge and professional experience, as well as their learning experience and outcomes achievement, practitioners' instructional approaches encompassing elements such as closed and open questionnaires, and a student learning inventory (**see Appendix i**).

Questions on student presage factors focused on their professional experience overall and in the particular field of studies, their professional status as well as the highest degree achieved before entering the current programme. The section on students' learning experience contained a closed and open questionnaire linked to Carver et al.'s (2007) model of experiential e-learning: students identified how far their learning collaboration with an external practitioner matched characteristics of learner-centeredness, agency, belongingness and competence, and evaluated the practitioners' impact in terms of these criteria.

In order to examine the pedagogical design's effectiveness regarding Carver et al.'s (2007) criteria, I provided a vignette on what learning in a virtual environment should look like in order to be effective for each of the experiential e-learning concepts. I then contrasted traditional classroom learning with these concepts and illustrated them in order to assess how far students experienced their practitioner interaction accordingly.

In the section on learning outcomes, within a small learning inventory, students were asked to provide a self-appraisal of their goal achievement regarding each of the three intended learning goals as well as an evaluation of the practitioner contribution to the effectiveness of their learning success, with both closed questions as well as the possibility to provide further comments and explanation. Instructional approaches were examined using a grid of 20 criteria based on Steinaker and Bell's experiential taxonomy (1979) (see Section 3.3.1) where students evaluated on a four-point Likert scale, whether and how far practitioners promoted a certain learning process by their instructional behaviour within practitioner-learner interaction.

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#### **4.3.3.2 Student Learning Outcomes Assessment**

Student Learning Outcomes were assessed solely by the teaching educator, based on students' contribution and participation in the virtual classroom. The grading took place within one week after the online class with practitioner-involvement ended. In order to assure quality and comparability of the results, educators received a grading scheme based on the two criteria's 'practical relevance' and 'content quality', pre-defined in accordance with the institution's student assessment regulations, and each graded on the pre-defined four-point scale:

**Table 7: Assessment Criteria**

Assessment Criteria	Expectation	Evaluation Scheme
<b>Content Quality</b>	Assignment to the relevant marketing submix is correct (task 1b)  Summary of the relevant differentiation aspects is specific (task 1c)  Derivation of the potential customer benefit is comprehensible, assignment to benefit category is correct (task 1d)	3 points: fully achieved
		2 points: largely achieved
		1 point: partly achieved
		0 points: not achieved
<b>Practical Relevance</b>	Differentiation criteria is relevant (task 1a) Suggested marketing measures are substantial (task 1e) Practitioner discussion is well-founded (task 2)	3 points: fully achieved
		2 points: largely achieved
		1 point: partly achieved
		0 points: not achieved

#### 4.3.3.3 Practitioner, Educator and Administrator Interviews

After the end of the virtual practitioner-student interaction, I personally interviewed practitioners and educators via telephone, Skype or onsite about their personal experience in respect the virtual learning setting (see **Appendix ii**).

As proposed by Perry (1998), my starting questions to the interviews were open, unstructured and “almost content-free” (p. 791), ignoring and not linking prior theory from the literature. However, in order to create a reliable framework for gaining comparable data for cross-case analysis and reaching a triangulation of sources by including “multiple perspectives” (Patton, 1999, p. 1193), questions on the broad variables Learning Experience and Outcomes as well as Practitioner’s Instructional Approaches as previously explained (see **Unit of Analysis**, Section 4.2.2), were included in the subsequent sections and conducted as semi-structured interviews.

This means that the interview protocols were built in conjunction with the other data collection instruments, in order to gain complementary perspectives and in-depth sights on the criteria as defined in Table 3, namely Student Learning Experience, Student Learning Outcomes, Practitioner Instructional Approaches as well as the Institutional Context.

Regarding students' learning experience and practitioners' instructional approaches, themes for the Student Online Survey were drawn from the corresponding theoretical frameworks as outlined in chapter 3.3. Here mainly quantitative data was collected. The practitioner interview were structured accordingly. Thereto, the initial and more general interview questions on the interviewees' experience and impressions of students' and practitioners' challenges were followed by enquiry on purposefulness and contributiveness of practitioner's instructional orientation as well as students' learning experience and outcomes.

In this way, I was first able to link practitioners', educators' and administrators' statements to the previously defined theme structure within the Student Online Survey and the Outcomes Assessment and triangulate data thematically between participating students, practitioners, educators and administrators. And second, since quantitative data from the Student Online Survey and Outcomes Assessment have been previously analysed before the interviews, I had the possibility to optionally define specific and individual questions that emerged from the preliminary quantitative outcomes and analysis.

Only after all the practitioner and educator interviews had been concluded did I interrogate the administrators involved, focusing on institutional aspects (**see Appendix iii**).

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#### **4.3.3.4 Practitioner-Student Interaction Analysis**

A further step was to adopt Steinaker and Bell's 'experiential taxonomy' (1979), as illustrated in Section 3.3.1 in order to code the data from the virtual practitioner-student conversations. According to their theory, "[u]nlike other taxonomies the experiential taxonomy focuses explicitly on teacher self-development as it elaborates

the sequence of activities from exposure to an experience through to its dissemination” (Morison and McMullan, 2013, p. 8).

However, as opposed to their original purpose, namely to examine student and instructor behaviour in traditional classrooms, I applied their framework in a virtual environment where practitioners instead of educators acted as learning facilitators.

The entire learning process encompasses five stages with sub-categories. In this case, since dissemination of newly acquired knowledge was not an intended learning outcome and thus not part of the learning design, for the coding, student-learning interaction was only assigned to the first four stages. In order to examine instructional role and behaviour, the transcripts of the practitioner-student online interaction were anonymised, exported and analysed. All parts of the instructional conversation of each practitioner were assigned to four of the categories provided by Steinaker and Bell’s (1979) taxonomy scheme. The interaction analysis was conducted in two steps: first, the conversations from the transcripts were divided into sequences. In the second step, the number of interactions were integrated into a grid so it was possible to quantify the analysis.

The major challenge, thereby, was to divide each of the instructional conversations into sequences or, in other words, to decide when a learning sequence starts and when it ends. This is not necessarily the start of a new forum conversation but may happen during the same practitioner contribution. For my quantitative analysis, each of the instructional sequences was assigned to the corresponding level from Steinaker and Bell’s (1979) experiential taxonomy. A sequence is defined as an instructional interaction from the instructor’s side. Within the same practitioner forum contribution there could be several sequences, if they differed regarding the level of interaction or the subject discussed. Within the analysis, a total of 145 relevant sequences could be identified in the four discussions. This process reflects a manifest content approach (Morison & McMullan, 2013), where interactions are selected and analysed focusing on categorical subjects as defined by Steinaker and Bell as experiential learning activities.



To summarise, within the conducted case study, data was collected through various methods, namely an online survey, learning outcomes assessment, interviews as well as an interaction analysis, where both quantitative and qualitative data is gathered. Furthermore, by including administrators, students, educators and practitioners as participants, perspectives from the most relevant stakeholders have been integrated. In this way, the case study design addresses the broad explorative research goal to conceptually examine experiential online learning's potential for effective management skills development as defined in the central research question.

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## **5 Research Findings**

The following chapter is divided into two sections: the first section briefly presents the quantitative outcomes based on the Student Online Survey (as described in Section 4.3.3.1), the Student Learning Outcomes Assessment (Section 4.3.3.2) from the Practitioner-Student Interaction Analysis (Section 4.3.3.4) as well as from the closed question on students' learning outcomes from the Practitioner, Educator and Administrator Interviews (Section 4.3.3.3). The presentation and integrative qualitative discussion of my research findings follows in Section 5.2. The quantitative results from Section 5.1 will be integrated into the discussion of the qualitative data, which was derived from the open questions in the Student Online Survey and mainly from the Practitioner, Educator and Administrator Interviews held after conducting each of the four cases.

Qualitative data was broadly open coded. In a preliminary step, where I aimed to identify abstractions regarding students' learning experience and instructors' role and behaviour, participants' responses were thematically organised and informed by the theoretical concepts discussed in Section 3.3. Afterwards, I conducted a thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of the gathered text data, first within each of the cases, and, in the next step, across the cases. Thus, I adopted a strategy usually applied in grounded theory approaches (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and inductive case study research (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) when constructing hierarchical structures among emerged categories: drawn from the openly-coded qualitative data, categories were identified, and then clustered into core categories. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), these core categories – whose properties, dimensions and interrelations are described in Section 5.2 – should have the “greatest explanatory relevance and highest potential for linking all of the other categories together” (p. 104). To organise my data and to illustrate the interrelations between those categories, I used Virtual Understanding Environment (VUE) software.

As discussed by Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), the presentation of findings and conclusions in terms of inductive case study research does not follow a certain standard and varies according to the readers' preferences. The challenge here is to

provide rich qualitative data within a comprehensive narrative, connecting evidence and prior theory with the emergent conclusions.

In order to detail the core categories, vignettes from the Student Online Survey and the Practitioner and the Educator and Administrator interviews will be provided and discussed in an integrated manner in Section 5.2, including prior explanatory theory. The characteristics, properties and findings concerning the interrelations between these core categories are the basis for my “integrative story” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 108) as presented in my conclusions in Chapter 6, where I will discuss the central research question and the associated sub-question. To illustrate this, I used an integrative diagram (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), which is presented at the beginning of Chapter 6: memos with participants’ coded responses were assigned to each category and the relationships between each of the categories linked to each other. Based on my discussion, I will define the requirements for an integrative framework as presented in Sections 6.1-6.3.

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## **5.1 Presentation of Quantitative Results**

The following presentation of quantitative results is based mainly on the Student Online Survey (see Section 4.3.3.1), which was completed by 24 students from four different cohorts. Data was aggregated from all the cases conducted. The reason for this procedure was the low number of respondents: only 24 of 86 students who participated in the cases as students also participated in the voluntary online survey. This constitutes 27.9% overall, while the lowest participation rate in a student cohort was 10.5% and the highest was 50%. Thus, an aggregation and comparison between each case would not have provided evident and comparable results.

Within the Student Online Survey, I generally applied a four-point Likert scale when examining students’ opinions in terms of the effectiveness of the online course design and activities, practitioners’ contribution to their learning success, and their goal achievement. I am aware that there is an ongoing methodological discussion about the ‘right’ size of a given scoring system, in particular in terms of the median degree that sets the ‘neutral’ position. In terms of the number of response categories, Lozano, García-Cueto and Muñiz (2008) suggest:

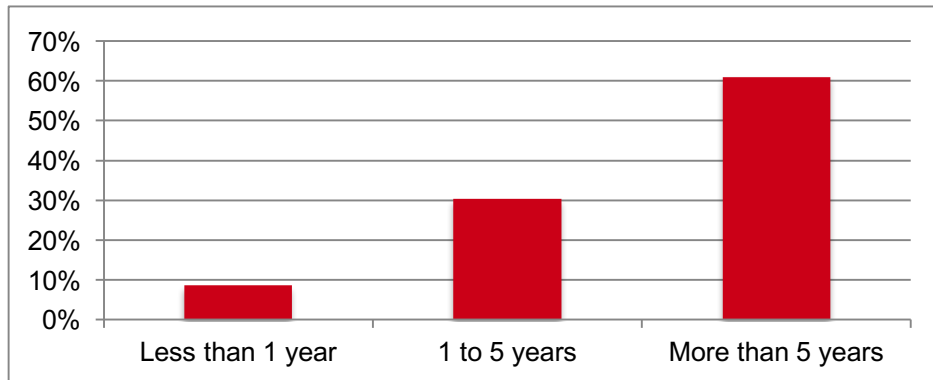
“the minimum number of response categories for items with Likert-type format should be at least four. As regards the ideal number, the data indicate that from seven categories onwards the gains are scarce from a psychometric point of view, suggesting the use of between four and seven” (p. 78).

Since it was my intention to provoke a distinct student statement, I decided to use a four-point Likert scale. However, when I asked about practitioners’ overall impact on their learning experience, I applied a five-point Likert scale, linked to the positions “mostly negative”, “rather negative”, “neither/nor”, “rather positive” and “mostly positive”. In this way, I wanted to assure an overall evaluation according to students’ natural statement, where “neither/nor” indicates a neutral reflection.

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### **5.1.1 Student Presage Factors**

In this section, I illustrate respondents’ professional and educational background, which constructs the relevant presage factors for this study and therefore is interesting to be aware of before progressing to the actual case study results. Students were asked to provide information on the length of their professional experience, their current professional status, their highest degree achieved as well as their professional experience in the field of study. Of the 24 respondents who completed the online survey, all of the participants show prior work experience. As explained in Section 4.2.1.2, HSO’s BASc programme is part-time and launched to students showing prior professional experience, therefore this is an expected result. It is interesting to look at the proportion of students from the perspective of the duration of their professional track record: 60% had at least 5 years of professional experience; 35% had between 1 and 5 years, while only two students had less than one year of work experience.

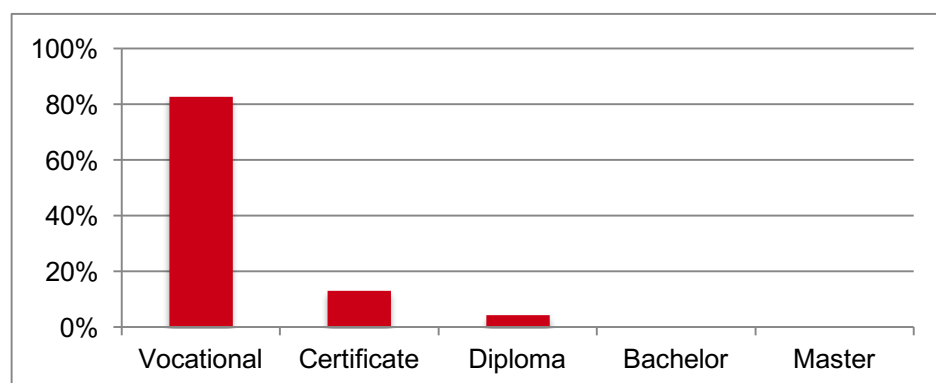
**Figure 5: Students' Professional Experience**

Asked about their current professional status, half of the students were employed as an assistant or case manager (52%). Such functions are typical entry-level positions. Thus, this group of BAsSc students does not usually show any managerial or leadership experience and are only randomly involved in tasks with a higher degree of responsibility, e.g. they occasionally take part in projects. Around one third (35%) served in an operative management position, which includes positions with a managerial function in business or support processes. This does not necessarily mean that people have leadership experience. Often, this group has a higher degree of competencies regarding functional decisions or financial responsibility. However, these aspects were not examined within the survey. Considering the respondents, only one served in a middle management position, which includes functions such as the head of a department or business process such as HR or Sales Manager. Two participants answered that they were in a senior management position, which is rather exceptional for students in the BAsSc programme. However, it is not unusual for self-employed professionals who, for example, operate small enterprises, to undertake this programme.

**Figure 6: Students' Professional Status**

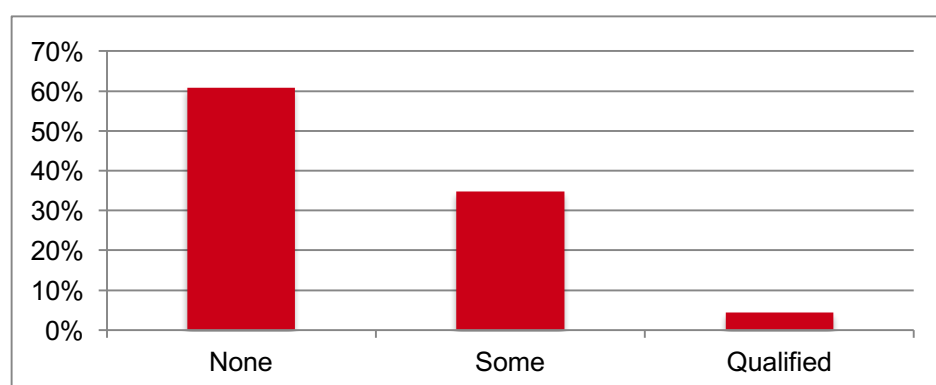
A large majority of the respondents (83%) have a vocational education qualification as the highest educational degree achieved, which they obtained before the start of their current studies. As explained in Sections 4.2.1.2 and 4.3.2.3, in the Swiss higher education area the programme is part of the dual track education framework, namely that it is undertaken by students with a vocational qualification as their first degree. As opposed to the Anglo-Saxon education model, the majority of learners in Switzerland are not following the secondary school-bachelor-master route but complete an apprenticeship before continuing their education and training in higher education alongside their employment as part-time students. Only a few (17%) have obtained a certificate or even a diploma. Again, these qualifications are acquired by ongoing professional education and training, which have no real equivalent in the Anglo-Saxon education model. None of the students has obtained a bachelor's or a master's degree. However, in reference to the European Qualification Framework (European Union, 2008a), the programme is assigned to Levels 5 and 6 within the European higher education system, that is it corresponds to the short and first cycle (bachelor level).

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**Figure 7: Students' Highest Degree Achieved**

It is interesting to look at students' relevant professional experience in the field of marketing, sales and/or communication. In total, 61% of the respondents do not show prior work experience, while 35% of the respondents show some and only one respondent identifies himself or herself as qualified and experienced, which means that s/he served several years in a position with a high degree of functional or personnel competence in the field.

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**Figure 8: Students' Relevant Professional Experience**

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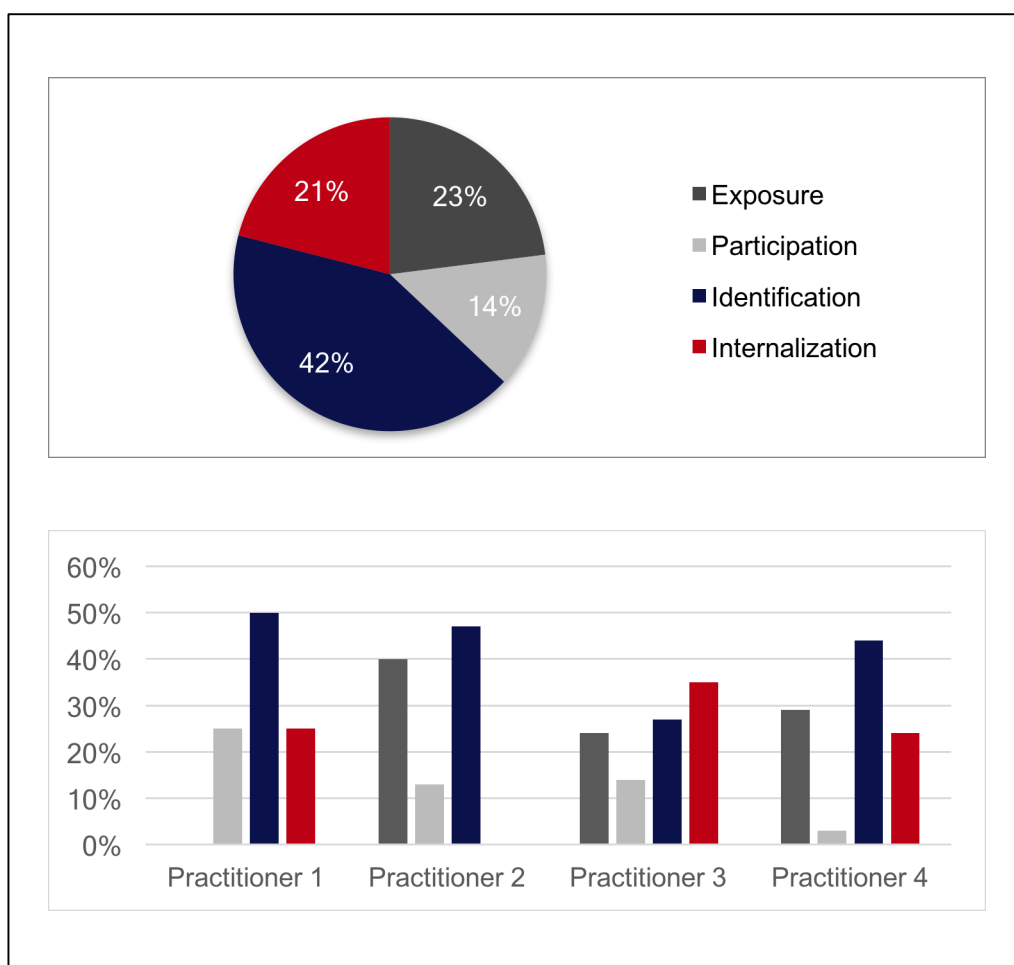
### 5.1.2 Instructional Approaches

In this section, I begin the presentation of the actual results, starting with the instructional approaches utilised by the practitioners within the online learning environment. Instructional approaches were quantitatively examined from two perspectives: through Student-Practitioner Interaction Analysis conducted by myself as researcher and by the students, who evaluated their instructor's role and behaviour in the online survey at the end of the course. As explained in section 3.3,

for both examinations, Steinaker and Bell's (1979) experiential taxonomy served as theoretical framework for my data collection.

The data of my practitioner-student interaction analysis as shown in the first chart in Figure 9 was aggregated for all the four conducted cases and shows on which level practitioners interacted according to Steinaker and Bell's experiential taxonomy. The number of interactions of each instructor and category was determined as a percentage of the total of interactions and the chart now shows the arithmetic average of all practitioners. The second chart in Figure 9 shows the percentage for each practitioner and category in detail.

**Figure 9: Researcher's Classification of Instructional Interactions**



In the context of this study, according to Steinaker and Bell's experiential taxonomy, the roles within each category may be illustrated as follows. Practitioners act as:



- Motivator, where they initially motivate students by illustrating the relevance of the intended learning outcomes regarding professional practice;
- Catalyst, where they accelerate student development by providing an array of practical resources;
- Moderator, where they act in their original role understanding and track, provide feedback, while asking questions regarding students' practical processes and outcomes; and
- Sustainer, where they positively empower students' performance and ability to further adopt appropriate strategies and patterns.

In reference to the experiential taxonomy (Steinaker and Bell, 1979), practitioners who were each assigned to a separate class mainly interacted on the level "Identification" (42%). In this study this level largely encompasses activities where instructors act as "Moderator", principally through exchanging points of view, questioning argumentation and position, clarifying corporate or market information etc. Furthermore, practitioners often interacted as "Motivator" on the level "Exposure" (23%) and as "Sustainer" on the level "Internalisation" (21%) while "Participation", where practitioners act as "Catalyst," ranked lowest (14%). In the following paragraphs, I will elaborate on each interactional level and illustrate these by providing a selection of vignettes drawn from the virtual discussion board for each of the practitioners.

At interactions on the level "Exposure" (23%) two different behavioural patterns could be identified: Practitioner 3 (6 out of 9 interactions in this category) and Practitioner 4 (9/12) referred mainly to practical concepts, which they illustrated by providing examples and principles, while Practitioner 2 shared her own experiential background (6/6), trying to stimulate further discussions with no direct link or discussion of the concept from a practical or theoretical perspective. Practitioner 1 did not interact on this level at all.

### Example Vignettes Exposure

- “Once again I notice how similar the product portfolios of Company X and Company Y are (...) personally, I think, I am less flooded with paper junk mail by Company X than by Company Y.”
- “Interesting topic. Smile. One can see how important early customer retention is. It already starts in childhood (...) Though it is very difficult to keep the overview and to choose the right offer for oneself (or one’s children).”
- “Side benefits correctly assigned. I ask myself, if this formal or extended product is relevant for Company X, should Service Y not be higher rated (sales proposition) concerning the side benefit, respectively the need, particularly for older people? On this aspect, you don’t refer to this in your subsequent conclusion.”

“Participation” generally ranked low. Practitioner 4 recorded 2%, Practitioner 2, 13%, Practitioner 3, 14%, and Practitioner 1 ranked highest with 25% of all interactions. As a strategy, Practitioner 1 (13/13) and Practitioner 3 (5/5) both recalled known concepts and frameworks in order to link them to practical aspects discussed by students, asking reasoning questions or providing further insights or data.

### Example Vignettes Participation

- “Does your company differentiate as to the low-cost provider in the market, respectively, is it acknowledged as being one? Price is an instrument in the marketing mix, though more with regard to price regulation and differentiation and not in terms of production costs.”
- “Is the core product replaceable? Could this service also be seen as an extended service?”

- “Be careful with the market definition: what represents the market precisely? ‘Middle segment’ is rather fuzzy and with Product Z, you cannot explain the market.”

Most of the interaction took place on the “Identification” level (42%): Practitioner 3 returned 27%, Practitioner 4, 44%, Practitioner 2, 47%, and Practitioner 1, 50% of all interactions on that level. Here, Practitioner 2 (7/7), Practitioner 1 (15/26), Practitioner 4 (17/18) and Practitioner 3 (9/10) exchanged mainly their points of view with the students as well as questioning their arguments and clarifying their proposed solutions and the information provided. In contrast to the others, Practitioner 1 (11/26) went further. He critically reflected on students’ assumptions as a basis for a more in-depth discussion, and he discussed their opinions either on a process level by referring to practical concepts or by challenging their hypotheses’ coherence by referring to the factual knowledge students provided in their discussion.

#### Example Vignettes Identification

- “It would be interesting to learn if Hospital X really gets less inquiries due to their internet presence. The (majority of) patients probably want personal conversations with an expert(?). I am just asking as a layman...”
- “Good reasoning. Though I ask myself if the extra costs outweigh the benefits for Insurance H, particularly as an older client segment is targeted which, again, increases the premium invoices”.
- “Regarding your recommendation, I would first conduct market research. The construction work takes great effort. Only if the market research shows that the desire for an own terminal is there, would I go to the board of directors”.
- “Good Morning Mr S. Thank you for your contribution. I take your point concerning your differentiation of services of the two companies and I also agree with your conclusions. I have the following questions to put to you: (...) Do you have indications that your online shop reflects a true customer need? I

mean, do you receive customer feedback or can you can you evaluate based on sales figures and market comparisons that Competitor X has a competitive advantage due to their online shop?"

In the category "Internalisation" (21%), Practitioner 2 failed to exhibit any activities, Practitioner 4 (24%), Practitioner 1 (25%) and especially Practitioner 3 (35%) interacted as "Moderator". One major interaction was dominant among these practitioners: practitioners reviewed and summarised students' discussions and solutions, providing an overall evaluation and reflection on their outcomes either from a practical or a learning perspective.

#### Example Vignettes Internalisation

- "Thanks for your contribution. With a wider range of products you demonstrate the market differentiation of Company E, though you promptly relativise it again. However, the task setting requires a considerable added value of the competitor, on which you build your own action recommendation for your own company in order to increase its competitiveness. Since you assume that the selected market differentiation does not represent a competitive advantage, in my view you did not answer the central question."
- "For Task A you name two different levels of product differentiation, namely the optimal location for tourist shops and the shop fittings. In Task C you then emphasise the brand aroma and the segmentation. And your conclusions focus again on the location, but regarding the market position. The identification of the product differentiation thus does not refer to your recommendation. Please elaborate once again on your thoughts regarding each of the differentiation criteria."
- "Your recommendation could be more concrete even though you recognised the development potential of your website."

- “Overall I think you did a good job. You present a good action recommendation. A certificate certainly could increase competitiveness. As for a suggestion regarding improvement, you could have listed the various certificates indicating their advantages and disadvantages.”

As stated, a conversational analysis of practitioners' contributions was originally not intended. However, due to the fact, that students' feedback on practitioners' discussion and their impact on students' learning experience and success within the online survey was weak, I decided to quantitatively compare practitioners' discussion in order to gain insights in practitioners' instructional orientation. Moreover, this analysis was the basis for the practitioner interviews, which I only conducted after a preliminary quantitative analysis of practitioners' conversations. The thematic discussion that emerged based this preliminary analysis is conducted in chapter 5.2.

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### **5.1.3 Student Learning Experience**

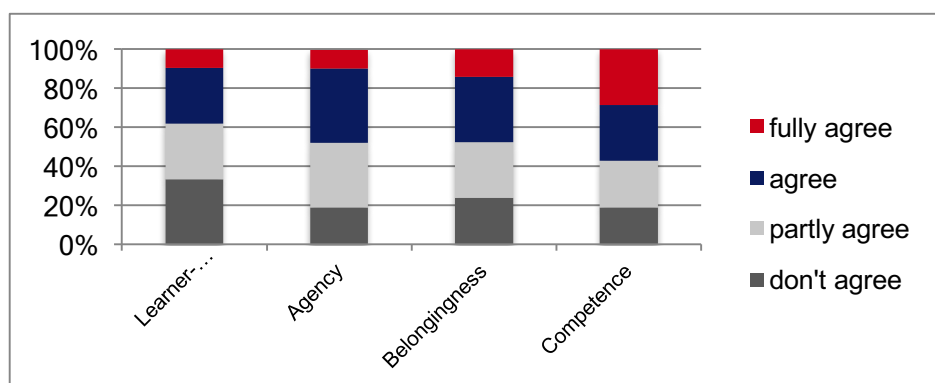
Also students were asked about practitioner's instructional role. Data from the Student Online Survey of respondents (n=24) from all four cases were aggregated. On a four-point Likert scale, students were asked to what extent a certain practitioner interaction took place, discussing each of the descriptors adopted from the experiential taxonomy and contextualised to the actual learning task.

The second central aspect, students' learning experience, was evaluated through the lens of several participants. The first, and most important, was that the students themselves were asked to provide information on how they experienced the interaction with the practitioner and how they evaluated it regarding its contribution to their individual learning.

In order to enable a quantitative analysis and comparison, an array of closed questions based on Carver et al.'s (2007) criteria regarding the experiential effectiveness of the online course design and activities, were implemented in the questionnaire. On a four-point Likert scale, students indicated how their learning experience within the online environment matched the learning effectiveness characteristics proposed by Carver et al. (2007), namely learner-centredness,

agency, belongingness, and competence (see Section 3.3.2). Figure 10 shows the percentage of participants for each of the four levels within the four-point Likert scale.

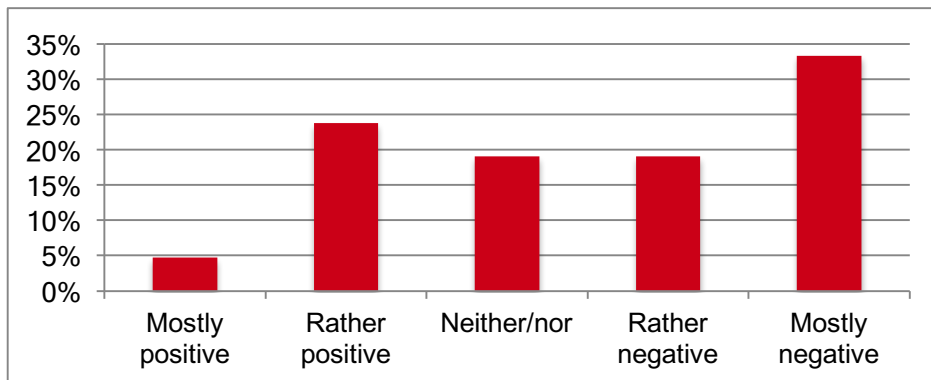
**Figure 10: Students' Evaluation of EE-Learning Criteria**



The above chart shows that students evaluated their online learning experience effectiveness as generally low: the majority of students stated that regarding criteria learner-centredness (62%), agency (52%) and belongingness (52%), the instructional design – encompassing practitioners' instructional role and behaviour linked to the condition within the online learning environment – does not or only partly fulfils the intended learning conditions. In terms of the competence criterion, 57% of the students evaluated their online learning as contributing to the acquisition of knowledge and mastering newly-learned skills through applying them to the provided real-world situations.

Students further evaluated practitioners' overall impact on their learning experience, showing the following picture, which is rather sobering: only 1 out of 3 respondents experienced practitioner engagement as rather (24%) or mostly positive (5%), while one fifth (19%) stated that the practitioner had neither a positive nor negative impact and the majority evaluated their involvement as rather (19%) or mostly negative (33%).

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**Figure 11: Students' Evaluation of Practitioner Impact**

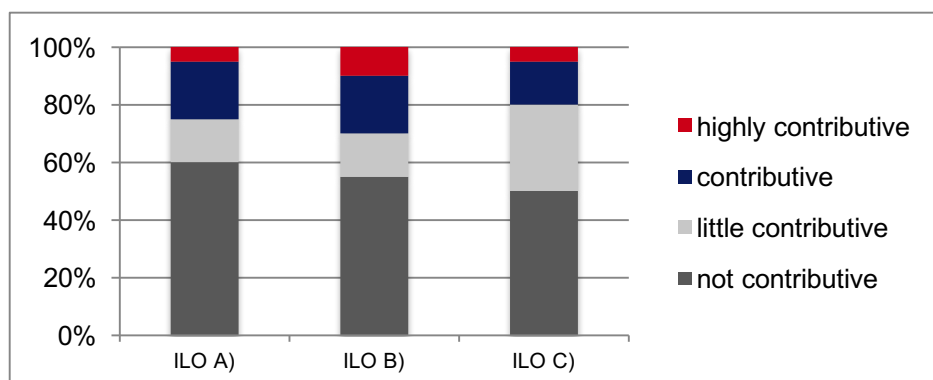
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#### 5.1.4 Student Learning Outcomes

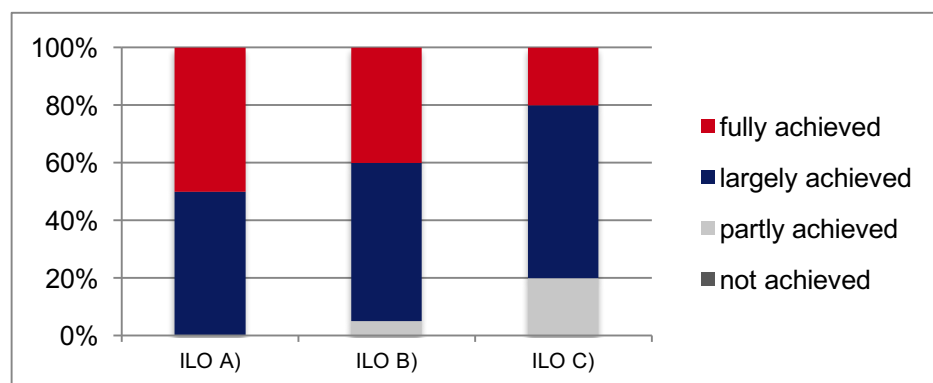
A similar picture as in the last section emerges when students appraise practitioners' contributions regarding each of the intended competences (ILO) as defined in the course curriculum in Section 4.2.2.2:

- A) Name the categorical structure of the marketing mix with its classic 4 sub mixes and explain it exemplary;
- B) Name the three characteristic levels of products (services) and derive the customer benefit therefrom;
- C) Formulate marketing goals considering the market's circumstances and respective target areas.

Regarding ILO (A), 60% of the students appraised practitioners' participation as non-contributive, while regarding ILO (B), 55% made the same judgement. Only in terms of ILO (C) did 50% of the students evaluate practitioners' involvement as at least a little contributive (30%), while one out of five (20%) contributive or highly contributive.

**Figure 12: Students' Appraisal on Practitioner Contribution**

At the same time, as demonstrated in Figure 13, students largely appraised their goal achievement as successful. For all ILOs, a great majority of students believed that they largely or fully achieved their learning goals. Only regarding ILO (B) (5%) and (C) (20%) did a minority believe that they only partly acquired the practical competences intended.

**Figure 13: Students' Appraisal of Their Goal Achievement**

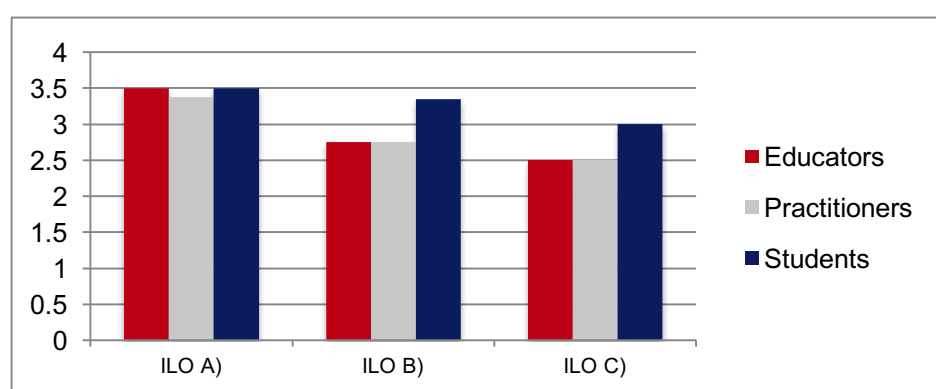
The next chart shows a comparison between educators, practitioners and students' evaluation of the overall goal achievement. Thereto, data from the Student Online Survey gained from all cohorts as seen in Figure 13 were averaged alongside the four-point Likert scale and compared with educators and practitioners' appraisal, which was derived from the interviews. It is important to say that due to the grading scheme, it was not possible to assign results from educators' actual learning outcomes assessment to each of the ILOs: the evaluation criteria were not separately



assigned to the competences but were allocated in an overall manner. For this reason, educators as well as practitioners' appraisal was inquired about during the interview. However, practitioners and educators' evaluations averaged over all statements of the four participants in each group corresponded to each other, while students' appraisal regarding ILO (B) and (C) were generally higher, although they did not vary greatly.

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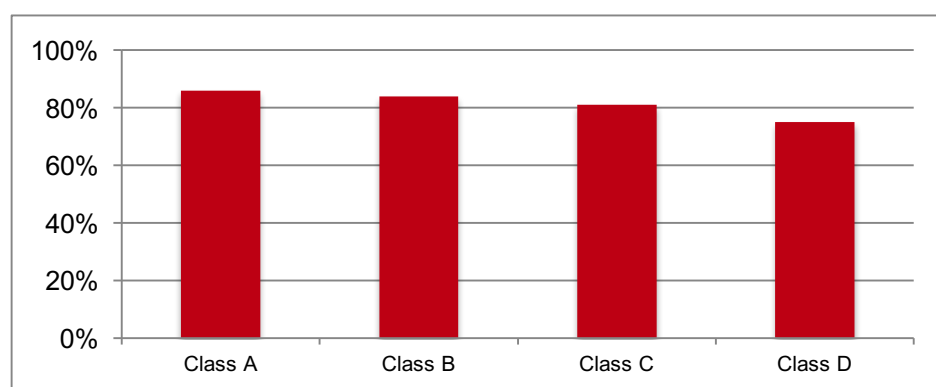
**Figure 14: Comparative Evaluation of Goal Achievement**



Finally, the last chart in Figure 15 presents the results from the formal assignment graded by the educators of each cohort and shows that classes achieved between 76% (Class D) and 86% out of the total possible points available. Comparative data could not be collected however, although according to the programme director, the grades were in the usual range for assessed virtual discussions.

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**Figure 15: Educators' Overall Outcomes Assessment**



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### 5.1.5 Outcomes Summary

Before I proceed with my discussion, I would like to briefly summarise the quantitative results of my study which have just been presented:

- 1) Practitioners' instructional orientation varies widely. Overall, there was a slight inclination to act as "Moderator" at the instructional level of "Identification" (Steinaker & Bell, 1979), though average percentages are distorted by the fact that one of the four practitioners completely omitted interaction on a certain level;
- 2) Students evaluated effectiveness of their interaction with the practitioners generally low. Particularly aspects regarding learner's autonomy such as learner-centredness and agency (Carver et al., 2007) have been assessed negatively while the majority of students indicated practitioners' engagement regarding competence as contributive;
- 3) The majority of students assessed practitioner-interaction as rather or mostly negative, while only one out of three shared a positive experience. Only regarding objectives on the higher cognitive level "Create" (Krathwohl, 2002) did a majority of students indicated that practitioners' contribution to an achievement of learning was somehow contributive;
- 4) Students mainly assumed that intended learning outcomes were achieved. This is confirmed by practitioners' and educators' opinions as well as through the formal assessment conducted by the educators.

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## 5.2 Central Categories and their Properties and Characteristics

The following section describes and discusses the central categories and their properties and characteristics (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) which resulted from the open coded qualitative data analysis, as explained at the beginning of this chapter.

Categories "represent the stories of many persons or groups reduced into and depicted by several highly conceptual terms", which "should have general

applicability to all the cases in a study” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 108). In other words, the categories “should lead up to the integrative study” (p. 108). Yin (2009) suggests initially using analytical tools such as tabulating events regarding their frequency and deploying a category matrix to map evidence within its categories. Similarly, after sorting the extracts from qualitative data to categories and clustering these categories to explanatory core categories, I again examined raw data to identify cross-relations between them. These I quantified regarding their frequency and assigned them to the respective respondent.

As discussed by Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), in inductive case studies such as presented in this thesis, researchers always undertake a balancing act of “better stories vs. better theories” (p. 29). In order to meet this challenge, I decided to provide vignettes from the Student Online Survey (Section 4.3.3.1) as well as from the Practitioner, Educator and Administrator Interviews (Section 4.3.3.3). For the presentation and discussion of my findings in this chapter, I considered it important to provide the rich story and context in order to comprehensibly illustrate the properties and dimensions of the core categories and categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in Section 5.2 but also to prepare a solid and tangible base for the explanatory story in order to prepare the discussion of my research questions in section 6.

In the following sections, I will elaborate on dimensions and properties (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of each of the central categories, while I also focus on their interrelations in my conclusions chapter 6, where I will discuss the research question. In order to provide orientation, at this point I briefly outline the central categories and their underlying categories:

**Table 8: Central Categories and Underlying Categories**

Central Categories	Outline
Student's Prior Knowledge and Experience	Student's prior professional experience, diversity of knowledge and experience, prior learning experience and routine
Learning Context	Accessibility to the learning context, usability of skills and knowledge
Scope of Learning	Thematic focus, task structure, aspirational level, time burden and the scheduling
Practitioner's Instructional Orientation	Practitioner's instructional behaviour, communication preferences, absence and impersonality and motivation
Educator's Role	Educator's influence in their traditional role and inherent role conflict
Institutional Conditions	Degree of organisational regulation and involvement and the systemic prerequisites

### **5.2.1 Student's Prior Knowledge and Experience**

Three categories emerged in my qualitative and quantitative analysis which I assigned to Students' Prior Knowledge and Experience as a central category: students' prior professional experience, the diversity of knowledge and experience in the student cohorts as well as their prior learning experience and routine.

**Table 9: Student's Prior Knowledge and Experience**

Underlying Categories	Outline
Students' prior professional experience	The degree of professional experience and thus the amount of domain knowledge and disciplinary skills of an individual student in the relevant field of study
Diversity of knowledge and experience	The heterogeneity of previously obtained domain knowledge and disciplinary skills in the field of study among the participating students
Prior learning experience and routine	The impact of prior learning experience and routines on students' learning conceptions

I would like to start my discussion by referring to students' appraisal of practitioner impact as presented in Sections 5.1.3 and 5.1.4. As discussed, students generally evaluated their interaction with practitioners as low, particularly regarding aspects of learner autonomy as indicated by learner-centredness and agency according to Carver et al.'s (2007) experiential e-learning framework. Going back to the raw data, a comparison between business students with some or substantial professional experience of marketing, sales and communications with students with no prior experience in the field reveals that students with prior experience were generally more positive about practitioners' impact on their learning experience (2.66 on a four-point Likert scale) than students with no prior experience (2.09). Hereto, Administrator 1 states: "Each student group has its own learning benefits (...) Students with prior professional experience can engage better. They already see the big picture". Indeed, the statement of Administrator 1 manifests in each of the single criteria as shown in Table 10.

**Table 10: Comparison between Pre-/Post-Experience Students**

Criteria	Evaluation by	
	Pre-experience Students	Post-experience Students
<b>Learner-Centredness</b>	2.08	2.22
<b>Agency</b>	2.17	2.67
<b>Belongingness</b>	2.22	2.50
<b>Competence</b>	2.50	2.89

These results (on a four-point Likert scale) confirm Green and Farazmand's (2012) findings while illustrating that prior internship experience improved their experiential course's effectiveness. In the absence of a conclusive explanation, they refer to Karns (2005) who might provide a reason for this: he underlines the importance of students' consciousness of the pedagogical concept's alignment with the relevance of intended knowledge and skills in the real world. Karns (2005) therefore suggests that educators should support students' understanding of the coherence between the intended learning outcomes and the connected course activities. Karns' (2005) argumentation manifests in Carver et al.'s agency criterion, which is described as the students' sense of autonomy, who feel they are empowered to influence the situation. Comparing the score between pre-experience (2.17 on a four-point Likert scale) and post-experience students (2.67) in marketing, communication and sales, a higher difference (0.5) is indicated than shown for the other criteria learner-centredness (0.14), belongingness (0.28) and competence (0.39).

In the context of my study, this point could well be a key aspect: while learners with prior professional experience apparently knew about the importance of the strategic decision competence that was promoted through the instructional design, students with no prior experience were probably not aware. Even though clear evidence could not be adduced either through quantitative data or through qualitative statements from the Student Online Survey or the interviews, this aspect remains an outstanding point which needs to be further investigated in order to successfully engage practitioners – particularly in pre-experience, undergraduate courses.

Students' prior professional experience is one factor which seemingly directly influenced student-practitioner interaction from the students' perspective. However, at the same time, the experiential diversity between the students in the class cohorts itself was identified as an aggravating factor. From his perspective as an instructor, Practitioner 1 complained:

“some students engaged in a discussion, while others just remained on their viewpoint (...) Around one third of the students didn't understand my feedback, probably because of their lack of professional practice (...) Their prior knowledge varied greatly, some having a clear idea of the business while others were somewhere in the Nirvana”.

Also, the other practitioners – Practitioners 2, 3 and 4 – expressed their difficulties regarding students' experiential diversity. This problem was compounded through the fact that practitioners did not know the students beforehand, not having had the possibility to get to know them personally or having information on their personal background.

Furthermore, all of the practitioners stated that even though they knew the curriculum, they didn't know what exactly the students were supposed to learn during the lessons. Indeed, as reported by all the educators, even though they had a detailed curriculum, showing exactly what theoretical knowledge and practical skills they would have to teach before conducting the virtual assignment, students' preparation varied greatly. This is also confirmed by Student 6: “The prior knowledge in class was already very different. The basics were imparted during the lesson and, only if there was still time, some topics could be discussed more in-depth”. Student 12 also complained: “The [knowledge needed to complete the] task in the virtual discussion was scheduled in the lecturer's syllabus two weeks after its completion”.

A further dimension is found in students' prior learning experiences. As discussed by Milligan et al. (2013), in their study on engagement patterns in connectivist learning, students who had participated in a prior course were generally more actively engaged and motivated in the next one. However, in my case, it was rather the

opposite: students who had already participated in prior modules and were already familiar with the learning design without practitioner participation were less positive. Students stated: “I like the normal version of a virtual discussion more” and “I find the [prior] clearly structured two-paged [task] more effective than such a virtual discussion”. On the other hand, Student 19 who did not have the opportunity to participate in one of the regular virtual discussions beforehand, stated “It was my first participation in a virtual discussion. I found that good since I didn’t know anything else”.

An explanation may be found in Gravoso, Pasa and Mori’s (2002) research. They demonstrated how students’ prior learning experiences and their predispositions impacted on their online learning conceptions: if students experience their online collaboration as beneficial to gain new knowledge and positively collaborate with other participants, the results are deep learning and better learning outcomes. On the other hand, if students feel that their learning is not contributive to their own development but only an absorption of information, learning stays on the surface and the outcomes remain poor. Educator 3 stated:

“For students, virtual discussions as assignments are usually just a compulsory assignment. Now someone [a practitioner] comes and wants even more. This wasn’t a problem in new classes. But experienced students are already familiar with the system and opposed [to any changes]”.

Also, from his perspective Administrator 1 mentioned: “The freshmen had not adopted to the normal system yet and it was easier for them to engage in a new situation”.

If, as stated by Educator 3, experienced students’ perceptions and expectations regarding their collaboration and contribution in virtual discussions were already low or even negative, the introduction of new forms of learning was generally a tough job. Given this, communication dynamics and the involvement of organisational members will be further discussed in Section 5.2.6, when I elaborate on institutional conditions.



### Summary of Findings

- a) Students with prior professional experience in the field of marketing, communication and sales achieved a notably higher sense of learner-centredness, agency, belongingness and competence (Carver et al., 2007) than pre-experience learners. It is probable that their awareness of the practical relevance of the knowledge and skills and the pedagogical concept's ability to promote meaningful learning has resulted in an advanced individual empowerment and subjectively felt learning effectiveness from student-practitioner interaction (professional experience);
- b) Experiential and knowledge diversity in a student cohort is an aggravating factor for the effective external involvement of practitioners as facilitators in virtual discussions. This aspect is amplified by practitioners' limited prior access to – as well as personal experience of – students and their individual backgrounds (knowledge and experience diversity);
- c) Prior negative learning experiences and the resultant lower expectations of virtual discussions' learning effectiveness may have biased advanced students' assumptions and expectations about the extended pedagogical concept's purpose involving practitioners as facilitators (learning routine).

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#### **5.2.2 Learning Context**

Regarding the central category Learning Context, two issues emerged: the accessibility of practitioners to students' practical context as the basis for their discussion; and the usability of the generic task in terms of the student's own professional context.

**Table 11: Learning Context**

Underlying Categories	Outline
Accessibility of practitioners to Students' practical context	Practitioner's capability to familiarise with students' internal and external business environment and ability to lead meaningful and in-depth conversation.
Usability of the generic task to Students' own professional context	Students' experiential basis and/or practical possibilities to apply newly learned skills and knowledge within their own professional environment.

As stated at the onset of Section 4.1, I considered conducting two instructional designs at the beginning of my study: the first, where business students provided their own practical context and directly discussed their issue or organisational challenge with a business practitioner within HSO's virtual environment; and a second where the business students directly interact with the practitioners as the learning object, which means that the practical context and challenges would have been provided by the external practitioner. For the reasons stated, namely that the complexity and dynamism of the authentic practical problems would not have fitted with the intended learning outcomes as defined by the curriculum, the alternative design could not be conducted within this formally assessed programme. This insight already provided a first finding in this central category, which I call the "Accessibility" issue. However, through the student feedback and the interviews, further perceptions could be discerned.

What would have been difficult for students was also a hurdle for practitioners in terms of getting involved in a substantial discussion. Practitioners 2, 3 and 4 explained that it was difficult to lead a discussion on the students' companies, even though they knew where students worked and had access to their company websites. Practitioner 1 stated: "Familiarisation with students' contexts was difficult, the information on their own companies was too complex. I think the learning effect would have been more substantial if I could have provided my own professional context, or at least if access had been easier for me". Practitioner 4 said: "I know how to make marketing strategies. But I am not an expert on their industries. This is why I

rather focused on the practical concept and the theory behind it instead of focussing on their industry". Meanwhile, Practitioner 2 stated: "My knowledge on students' industries varied. My access to their contexts was therefore difficult" while further explaining that it was difficult to go deeper into a practical discussion since the thematic range regarding students' practical context was limited: "I could provide a different perspective, a critical perspective, but more than that was difficult".

This was also criticised by students. Student 4 stated: "The practitioner's opinion would certainly be of interest. However, he has too little relation to the company and its competitors in order to provide specific feedback" or, as reported by another student, "I had the feeling, that the expert doesn't really know the industry I work in". Administrator 2 adds: "A general topic rather than an overly-specific one is more suitable. The practitioner can only provide valuable input, if he or she can provide the context. This would be the case for example in a later semester, where students are already on a higher level. If students don't make substantial contributions themselves, it is difficult for the practitioner to become involved. Or, I would suggest to launch the format in an upper programme, where students have more professional experience and theoretical knowledge". Administrator 2's opinion is also shared by a student, who states "The practitioner's discussion was not in-depth".

Furthermore, students come from diverse professional backgrounds, which is typical for dual track professional education and training as well as post-experience management education. Students, therefore, have a different experiential basis, motivations and needs. However, one aspect emerged as an issue: as discussed by Educator 1, some students encountered difficulties in applying the marketing task to their own professional environment, as they were asked to do in the task. As he stated: "One of the students worked for a non-profit organisation, another for a public association". Where students didn't feel able to employ the marketing task within their own professional context, he advised them to adopt a generally-known company in order to complete the assignment. However, as he further explained, "this led to descriptive solutions without going in-depth".

Both aspects are already discussed in the literature. Westera (2011) refers to Hull (1993, cited in Westera, 2011, p. 220) who claimed that learning only occurs in contexts where “learners are able to connect information to their own frame of reference, which is supposed to reflect their inner world of memory, experience, and response”. Westera adds, “[n]aturally, such personal frame of reference is largely fostered by the individual’s experiences and interactions with the real world so far” (p. 202). In a distance learning context, the usability aspect is a major concern in relation to promoting effective, efficient and satisfactory learning (Martyn, Chetz & Anne, 2007). In the context of this study, “usability” as defined above is determined by the accessibility to the practical learning context of both main participants, namely students and practitioners. Furthermore, as illustrated previously regarding theoretical access, the educator who taught theoretical basics in the traditional classroom at a preliminary stage plays the key role. Even though both routes are optimally dovetailed, usability remains low if the applicability in the student’s own professional context is compounded through its missing practical relevance and appropriateness.

Otherwise, and in terms of essential theoretical knowledge prerequisites, the particular task was not challenging for any of the practitioners. Only Practitioner 3 mentioned that he had to go back to his own school books in order to ensure he was using the correct terminology and to shed light on the theoretical knowledge they had just learned. He said: “The theoretical link was sometimes difficult” while Practitioner 2 suggested: “It would have been good to know exactly what they already have learned at school in order to have enough time to once again look at the theoretical knowledge”.

### Summary of Findings

- A learning context outside the experiential and theoretical scope of the participants hampers their motivation and effective learning through practitioner-student interaction (accessibility);

- A lack of applicability of the practical management skills as learning objectives in terms of the student's own professional context obstructs their effective and thus satisfactory involvement in collaborative learning through student-practitioner interaction (usability);
- Both findings may be explained by participants' prior-built personal "frame of reference" (Hull, 1993), which is the basis of effective, efficient and satisfactory participation (Martyn et al., 2007).

### 5.2.3 Scope of Learning

Under the core category Scope of Learning, I assigned the thematic focus, the task structure, the time burden and the scheduling, which emerged as relevant categories:

**Table 12: Scope of Learning**

Underlying Categories	Outline
Thematic focus	Thematic range and individual space for student-practitioner collaboration as defined by the formally-assessed task setting
Task structure	Processual segmentation and solutions structure defined by the formally-assessed task setting
Time burden and scheduling	Temporal expenditure of students and practitioners and chronological coordination of their activities

Practitioner 2 made the criticism that the task was too limited regarding its room for a free discussion and suggested "to construct the task in order that it is more open, giving more space for practitioners and students to develop discussion and expand its thematic range". Similarly, but more related to the practical framework which was examined, Student 6 criticised its strong theoretical link: "A lot was taken from theory (books), thus, the expert couldn't incorporate these points". Both points were curriculum-based since, as mentioned previously, it was necessary to cover the assessed formal learning outcomes. In this context, Administrator 2 suggested the creation of "an authentic leadership situation instead of a didacticised task setting".

Also, the high segmentation of the task confused students as well as the practitioners. Practitioner 4 stated that “the structure of the task was not clear” and, regarding the same point, Student 7 commented “The virtual discussion was absolutely chaotic and unstructured, which caused additional time expenditure, confusion and was absolutely demotivating”. Student 14 stated “Overall a very squishy task and confusing until the end”. However, Student 23 merely commented “Confusing task”. Regarding students’ contributions, Practitioner 1 said “There was no red thread in the solutions, they were not stringent. Students had a lot of problems to carry out the solution process”.

It is important to say that, regarding the structural, processual and temporal dimensions, this study shows its major limitations. Given that the virtual practitioner-student interaction took place within a research design and, at the same time, due to ethical considerations, existing study regulations had to be fully taken into account: one of the major obstacles for practitioners and students obviously was the highly structured task which, as a consequence of the external involvement, had to be more fragmented in temporal and content-related terms. The task, which was revised by myself, reviewed by the programme directors and released through the higher education Dean, had to comply with the conditions implied by the study regulations. This means that the learning outcomes assigned to the module had to be covered, the workload of 6 hours should not be exceeded, students had to conduct an individual piece of work and the overall duration of the discussion had to be exactly 4 weeks. The involvement of the practitioner was planned to take place after 2 weeks, in order to give students enough time to prepare their initial contribution. Also, due to the fact that the practitioner was external, this contribution had to provide enough contextual information from students’ professional environments to spark a discussion and, furthermore, demonstrate a practical application as a basis for the practitioner’s critical review as a professional in the field of marketing, sales and/or communications. As a consequence of this temporal and context-related fragmentation, the structure of the task and the process were widely criticised by all participants for different reasons.

Overall, the student-practitioner interaction in the virtual environment did not correspond to an online pedagogy which is learner-centred, self-regulated and allows a personalisation of learning (Sun, 2014). Even though students could provide their own professional context which was therefore individual and authentic, the content curation as well as the learning process itself was heavily controlled through the task itself. Furthermore, instead of focussing on the learning process, where the student and practitioner could already have interacted, the product of learning, namely the strategic recommendations as the basis for further discussion, were the focus. In this way, experience as a basis for collaborative capacity-building and skills-development (Sun, 2014) could not be optimally promoted.

Another major challenge for each of the practitioners was the time burden and the fixed scheduling imposed by the virtual course syllabus. Practitioners were asked to provide their initial feedback within one week while the rest of the discussion was designed not to directly link to an assignment requirement for the students. All of the practitioners reported their limited available time due to their managerial positions. Practitioner 3 stated that “I couldn’t put enough effort in as I didn’t have enough time. The fixed deadlines were a problem for me”. In terms of their involvement, for which the time burden was initially estimated as 4-6 hours, practitioners indicated the following time exposure:

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**Table 13: Practitioners' Time Burdens**

<b>Practitioner</b>	<b>Time Burden</b>
Practitioner 1	8-12 hours
Practitioner 4	4-6 hours
Practitioner 3	8 hours
Practitioner 2	3-4 hours

Practitioner 1, who invested more time than anyone else, added: “If I invested less time, I couldn’t have provided a quality discussion that I would have expected of myself as a student”. As reported by Administrator 2, students generally appreciated practitioners’ intensive involvement in continuing discussions. However, this is not an experience all students share. Student 18’s feedback reflected this: “The whole thing

took far too much time, if you consider, that most of the students work alongside their studies". Administrator 2, who was directly involved in a discussion of the case, received as further feedback that the initial input phase in class was too short to effectively promote the self-directed learning suggested in the student-practitioner interaction. Practitioner 2, who spent the least amount of time on student interaction, would have appreciated spending more time but with fewer people: "I think, a more in-depth discussion would have been possible if I only had one group of students but therefore over a longer time period". Also Administrator 2 suggested lengthening the total period "to 3-4 weeks, so an in-depth discussion could take place".

### Summary of Findings

- The limited possibilities to extend the thematic focus and the strong theoretical linkage induced by the formally-assessed learning outcomes reduced motivation for the active engagement of both practitioners and students (thematic focus);
- The higher fragmentation of the task led to confusion and demotivation of students and, as a result, affected non-stringent practical problem solutions (task structure);
- The tight schedule together with students' time constraints due to their workload and dynamic circumstances in their managerial positions complicated practitioners' participation and limited their efforts (time scheduling);
- Time exposure of some students generally increased due to the task involving an external practitioner and additionally with practitioners' committed participation. Practitioners' dedicated presence and engagement was not welcomed equally by students (time burden).



### 5.2.4 Practitioner's Instructional Orientation

The central category of a Practitioner's Instructional Orientation encompasses practitioners' instructional behaviour, communication preferences, absence and impersonality and motivation:

**Table 14: Practitioner's Instructional Orientation**

Underlying Categories	Outline
Instructional behaviour	Practitioners' assumptions and convictions, which influence their self-conception and behaviour as facilitators towards students
Communication preferences	Familiarity and openness regarding digital forms of communication and the ability and readiness to implement them effectively
Absence and impersonality	Sense of belongingness and community as basis for commitment and trust for collaborative learning among students and practitioners
Motivation	Practitioners' motivation and reason for participation as facilitator of experiential business learning

As evidenced by the relevant interviews, practitioners' instructional role and behaviour was based mainly on their own assumptions and convictions: while Practitioner 4's main concern was: "Does my behaviour align with that of a teacher" and "how would a teacher deal with students and do I have the same opinion", Practitioner 1 was conscious that "there was a risk of taking up the role of a quasi-educator" and "I saw my role as a non-evaluator who is not responsible for giving grades" while adding "I tried to avoid appraisals". At the same time, Practitioner 2 was rather lacking in awareness regarding his instructional role and behaviour. When I reflected on his interaction with students and debated potential discussion strategies with him, he answered "I just didn't know what would have been possible. Actually it is so simple". Meanwhile Practitioner 3 stated: "I was legitimised to contribute as a practical expert while I saw the students in their role as employees. My mission was the practical concretisation, bringing in the practical requirements and expectations" continuing that, "I tried to gain access with a non-pedagogical style".

The question of how the practitioner involved him or herself is central to answering the research question. The potential variety was intentional and part of the research design and – as already detailed in the second chart in Figure 9 and illustrated by practitioners' different self-conceptions – practitioners' instructional behaviour and action varied greatly. As claimed by Fernández-Toro and Hurd (2014), feedback plays a crucial role in a learning process such as online tutorials and, as designed in this case study, where practitioners were involved as facilitators.

Before I continue my discussion on practitioners' instructional behaviour and action, I would like to provide some vignettes from students' feedback regarding practitioners' instructional behaviour in order to illustrate their instructional experience.

- Student 9: "The feedback from the practical expert was rather superficial. I didn't gain any new insights."
- Student 13: "The practitioner's contribution in the virtual discussion was not aligned with the task and caused confusion. Based on practitioner's response, a discussion couldn't take place."
- Student 6: "Even though I received feedback, there was no suggestion for an improvement. The critique wasn't meaningful either."
- Student 1: "The practical expert did not respond to my contribution, as demanded in the task. There was no question etc."
- Student 4: "Even though my fellow students received feedback, I didn't get any."
- Student 15: "The expert/facilitator, who aims to promote the discussion, should be familiar with the task's requirements. This wasn't the case, in my opinion, since the practitioner's statement did not comply with the task setting."

In Educator 2's opinion, practitioners contributed mainly to students' practical skills development when they linked theory to the practical context. He makes the overall criticism that the "practitioner's feedback varied greatly regarding its quality. It was partially very shallow and caused students more confusion. Often, the feedback was just too short" adding that "Where the practitioner went deeper, it promoted further discussion, which was valuable for the students". According to the selection criteria, practitioners "must not have been employed as full- or part-time faculty in business education programmes and must not have conducted any programmes in order to enhance pedagogical skills or showing any teaching experience within a business educational institution's context" (see Section 4.3.2.2). As illustrated here, in terms of feedback quality, Educator 2 only confirmed what was revealed by the direct student feedback: one of the major practical challenges for the involvement of practitioners was the instructional discussion itself. One could argue that instructional behaviour was imposed mainly by the task setting itself. However, since practitioners were intentionally not instructed regarding their instructional role and behaviour and since there were no further discussion guidelines for their activities in the forum, this was not the case. Naturally, as illustrated by the vignette, this turned out to be a major issue, though also one of the crucial aspects for further institutional practice which is the aim of this research: practitioners encountered major difficulties in providing valuable feedback that was clear, in-depth, task-related as well as reliable and on-time. The above vignette refers to three out of four practitioners. In fact, Practitioner 1 was the only practitioner who received no negative comments from the students.

Regarding practitioners' student communication, a further aspect mentioned in the interviews was its virtuality. For some practitioners, this way of communication was rather unfamiliar. Practitioner 1 stated:

"I am not part of the SMS generation. I therefore consciously paid attention to the formulation of my answers. All my feedbacks were very objective and I always answered without cynicism and using full sentences as I normally communicate in my own professional setting. I stayed authentic".

Regarding the virtual form of communication, Practitioner 4 states “it is usually not my preferred way of communication. I prefer personal presence”. It is interesting that Practitioner 1, who did not receive negative student feedback, critically questioned himself regarding his communication style and behaviour. Apparently, his conscious decision to stay “authentic” was supportive in terms of finding a more effective way to address students compared to other practitioners. However, since it was not reflected by further student feedback or comparable data provided by other practitioners or educators from an outside perspective, this cannot be fully confirmed.

A further aspect which was widely discussed was the practitioners’ absence and impersonality. Students in online classrooms need the feeling of belongingness to each other: Chen and Chiou (2014) underline the crucial factor of communication between facilitator and students in order to build a sense of community. Factors like commitment, trust, shared goals and perspectives are seen as the basis for students’ motivation and cognitive engagement. The question at this point is whether and how far practitioners’ absence led to a lower sense of belongingness and therefore less motivation and cognitive learning.

Here, participants’ opinions diverged. Practitioner 4 stated that “Having no relation to the students is a constraint” and “A relation to the students would open up access to their personal and professional background”. Practitioner 3 remarked, “I kept a neutral role (...) My absence was neither positive nor negative”. Meanwhile, in Practitioner 4’s opinion, “Distance didn’t play any role” while Practitioner 2 emphasised, “I see the impersonality as an advantage. I think it didn’t influence my interaction either positively or negatively. In this way, I could remain objective in relation to the students. The educator who knows the people is always biased”.

The educators have a different perspective. Educator 2 states that the given practitioner’s absence was a problem, since he wasn’t known by the people. Educator 3 also stated: “The practitioner was a stranger, who criticized them. It doesn’t matter if the feedback was positive or negative, his suggestions were interpreted as harsh criticism. Three out of four students felt so. The impersonality was definitely a problem”. Furthermore, he suggests, “The practitioner should be

introduced to the class beforehand in order to prevent him from being a disruptive factor". With one exception, students did not comment on that point. Student 5 stated

"The room for discussion was too small and the direct contact to the practitioner was missing. I think I could have profited more if I had personally met the expert. The discussion could have been more intense. Though, I am aware that such a possibility is difficult to provide to each student, this is why I find the virtual discussion a very good approach".

Even though collaboration among students was not promoted in this study, their interpersonal connections are created through their learning throughout their classroom activities and collaboration. However, the practitioner remained outside these existing relationships and did not have the opportunity to strengthen them during the brief interaction time. The different views as described by practitioners and educators demonstrate the variety of goals, expectations and belongingness to the school and the students themselves. However, Rovai (2002) stresses that it is exactly this "connectedness" that is a prerequisite for the "feelings of friendship, cohesion, and satisfaction" in order to promote "safety and trust" (p. 322) and, as a consequence, "members of the community will respond in supportive ways". As illustrated by Educator 3, even though some of the practitioner's contributions were truly valuable and could have contributed to students' practical management skills development, Rovai's propositions (2002) would explain why most of them were unable to accept the practitioner's statement.

Even though it was neither the aim nor were the systemic and temporal conditions given, in terms of sustaining practitioners' situational involvement to help develop an online network community, aspects such as students and practitioners' needs, goals and motivations have to be aligned and shared: only if meaning is shared and collaboratively constructed can the learning community sustain itself based on common acceptance and individual satisfaction (Rovai, 2002). The common learning disposition is therefore critical.

Since practitioners' motivations and reasons for participation were a major influence on their instructional behaviour, their individual motivations and goals for participating become particularly important. As it turned out, practitioners were motivated mainly by one factor: the possibility of gaining insights into other corporate and professional contexts. Practitioners 2, 3 and 4 reported that this was their main interest in participating in the virtual discussion. Practitioner 2 stated that "It was an interesting experience, interesting to have access to so many different industries and topics". Practitioner 4 underlined "The link to different industries and the insights obtained thereby excited me" while Practitioner 3 remarked "I expected to get new insights. And it was indeed very interesting". It is also worth examining practitioners' answers to the question of whether and under what circumstances they would participate in a permanent experiential online learning network. Practitioner 2 answered: "The willingness is there, but only when a thematic deepening is possible". Practitioner 3 stated: "It was overall a positive experience" however, regarding further participation, "Yes and no. The possibility to gain insights into new industries and their challenges is crucial for further participation". And Practitioner 1 emphasised: "A renewed participation is only satisfying when knowledge and experience exchange is at a high level. This means when professional competence is already there".

From the practitioners' answers, two motivational aspects can be identified. The first, as explained by Practitioners 2, 3 and 4, is the disposition to gain insights and learn from students' professional contexts and their practical perspectives and experience. Also, Practitioner 1's motivation is based on his wish to lead quality conversations based on a matching high level of expertise. This illustrates the challenge for further and sustainable engagement within a learning community. Practitioners and students' learning dispositions are difficult to match in terms of creating a group goal and shared community value proposition (Rovai, 2002).

### Summary of Findings

- Practitioners' instructional role and behaviour was influenced mainly by their own assumptions and convictions and varied from an authentic managerial

attitude to a quasi-educator tenor (instructional behaviour);

- Quality instructional discussion turned out to be practitioners' major challenge: quality differed in terms clarity, its depth, task-relatedness and reliability, which was partly influenced by practitioners' communication preferences. There is an indication that communicative authenticity led to satisfactory discussions (communication preferences);
- Practitioners' inherent absence and impersonality to students was differently interpreted by educators and practitioners. However, there are theoretical propositions that missing "connectedness" (Rovai, 2002) could have created a negative student attitude towards practitioners' involvement (absence and impersonality);
- Practitioners were motivated mainly by the opportunity to gain insights into other professionals' corporate and professional context or by leading valuable professional discussions (motivation).

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### 5.2.5 Educator's Role

Under the core category Educator's Role, three categories were identified: educators' informal influence in their traditional role; the inherent role conflict between the educator and the practitioner; and the aspirational level.

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**Table 15: Educator's Role**

Underlying Categories	Outline
Informal influence	Educators' influence on students' learning activities and behaviour outside the scope of the traditional classroom
Role conflict	Practitioners' behaviour as facilitator conflicting with educators' self-perception
Aspiration level	Educators' aspired level of skills and knowledge, interpreting the school's syllabus

In my first definition of the units of analysis in Section 4.2.2, the educator was part of the institutional context and not a participant in one of the cases. However, through my review of students' comments and the interview analysis, I found out that even though educators did not actively engage as facilitators in the virtual discussion, they still had a major influence on the virtual learning unit. This happened for several reasons.

One of the educators reported that he was excited about the possibility of students interacting with external practitioners and was therefore "selling" an active participation in class. However, as he stated, "I provided wrong information and caused confusion by giving them other instructions about the solution space than demanded in the task setting". Meanwhile, other educators prepared their students for their virtual discussion, even though they were not asked to do so. One educator stated: "I have gone through the whole virtual discussion with my class one-to-one in order to prepare them well for their discussion with the practitioner". In addition, one educator "briefed" them about the task in class while another educator was the only one who did not link his lecture to the online virtual discussion.

Another aspect which was illustrated by the above-mentioned educator who caused the unhappy intervention was that after he realised his mistake, he could not directly intervene. In his case, during the time of the virtual learning unit, he never saw the students in class. Furthermore, educators identified an inherent role conflict between the educator and the practitioner in his or her instructional role. Educator 3 stated: "They received two feedbacks, from the educator and the practitioner. This put them off their stride," while Educator 1 made the criticism that "The practitioner behaved in an unfortunate manner by providing feedback to formal criteria such as the presentation of the solution like a teacher".

In their responsibility as educators and being personally exposed, they naturally cared about students' learning activities and progress inside and outside of the traditional classroom. This was particularly the case because the virtual practitioner-learner interaction was embedded in a hybrid approach, where prior learning was extended online and pursued onsite, both simultaneously and after completion of the



online unit. Educator 2 thereby suggested that “A role concept must be defined. Otherwise there is an inherent role conflict and confusion between educator and practitioner. In this case, it caused additional confusion”.

A further aspect which turned out to be conflictual was the aspiration level of the practical solution process. Even though the task was reviewed by the higher education Dean and the programme director, educators’ opinions regarding its meeting the expected student level differed. In Educator 4’s opinion, “The task was thematically good and the task appropriate to the student level”. On the other hand, Educator 3 stated that “The task was extremely simple”. It seems that educators did not share interpretations of the aspiration level intended by the formally assessed learning outcomes and it can be therefore assumed that not all student cohorts were well prepared to provide solutions for the practical task and their discussion with the practitioners.

### Summary of Findings

- Even though educators were non-participative in the student-practitioner interaction, they directly influenced its process and outcomes through their responsible role in the traditional classroom (informal influence);
- Practitioners’ involvement as embedded in a hybrid course design generated a role conflict in relation to educators’ responsible role in and around the classroom (role conflict);
- Educators did not interpret the aspiration level for the related virtual task equally. As a consequence, it can be assumed that some student cohorts were insufficiently prepared for their practitioner interaction (aspiration level).

### 5.2.6 Institutional Conditions

From the interviews, two categories emerged within Institutional Conditions: organisational regulation and involvement; and the systemic prerequisites.

**Table 16: Institutional Conditions**

Underlying Categories	Outline
Organisational regulation and involvement	Degree of prior regulation and communication of organisational change and involvement of organisational members
Systemic prerequisites	Adoption of external involvement and its implementation in the running online learning management system

It is important to note that the student-practitioner interaction course design conducted in this case study was extremely challenging for institutional participants such as programme directors, programme managers and system administrators. Also, due to the obligations imposed by the University of Liverpool's ethics approval process and due to my power-relationships within the organisation, my own scope of action and communication was limited. While the broad involvement of employees on all levels, alongside communication measures including "selling" the concept's idea to students, would usually take place, this was not the case in this study. My future interview partners should not be affected or even coerced by project marketing and propaganda nor should the programme managers at the campuses as non-participants in the research project be influenced or impacted in any way. However, the main actors involved in student affairs should not have any influence on the students' mood or opinion formation while conducting the cases.

Administrator 2 brought the issue to the fore:

"Normally, instructional formats are precisely explained in the student handbook and modifications are carefully announced. Also, organisational change is proactively promoted and potential risks anticipated and dealt with at an early stage. But not in this case. The practitioner's individual assumptions and behaviour was dominant in

terms of the learning process and its outcomes. Also, programme managers on campus are usually involved. But not this time. Since they were not involved in the project, they just passed on students' questions to me, even though they would have normally been dealt with responsibly. Although I gave my best and was there for the students, I was always one step behind."

Furthermore, Administrator 2 added that "There was huge uncertainty among the programme managers. The course design was highly complex and the coordination very time-consuming." And Administrator 1 commented that "Programme managers felt alienated, which is a problem in our decentralised organisation where they usually play a decisive role within the learning organisation".

Even though the project was not conducted in the usual business manner, the case study demonstrates the importance of the broad involvement of affected and responsible organisational members, the prior implementation of organisational regulations and the relevance of proactive communication measures. In this particular case, where a new form of learning is promoted through external participants which potentially impairs the existing understanding of roles, internal communication is crucial.

Another aspect that emerged was the inflexibility and thus laborious adjustments required in terms of running the online learning management system. As mentioned by Administrator 2, "Our system is just not ready and flexible. Our system administrator had to switch all automated communication and coordination processes to manual. What is usually simple became very demanding". Furthermore, the system's default settings could not provide a pleasant and easy-to-use environment for practitioners. Even though practitioners were instructed by Administrator 2 how to use the forum, the latter's functionality was cumbersome, since the contributions were not folded and lined up in one tab but listed successively. All practitioners complained about low user-friendliness. Practitioner 1 even stated: "The online learning system was a disaster. I think, I spent half of my time between students'

contributions in order to be able to follow my own discussion. Given this system basis I would not be willing to participate again”.

#### Summary of Findings:

- The lack of prior regulation, communication with students, and the missing involvement of organisational members has led to information vacuums and reactive remediation instead of proactive and circumspect planning and implementation. In addition, the explorative character of the research project and the intended unpredictable instructional action of practitioners caused impossibilities for all participants (organisational regulation and involvement);
- The missing system's prerequisites for implementing the practitioners' instructional role internally caused cumbersome workarounds for systems administrators and administrative staff as well as unsatisfactory participation of external practitioners (systemic prerequisites).

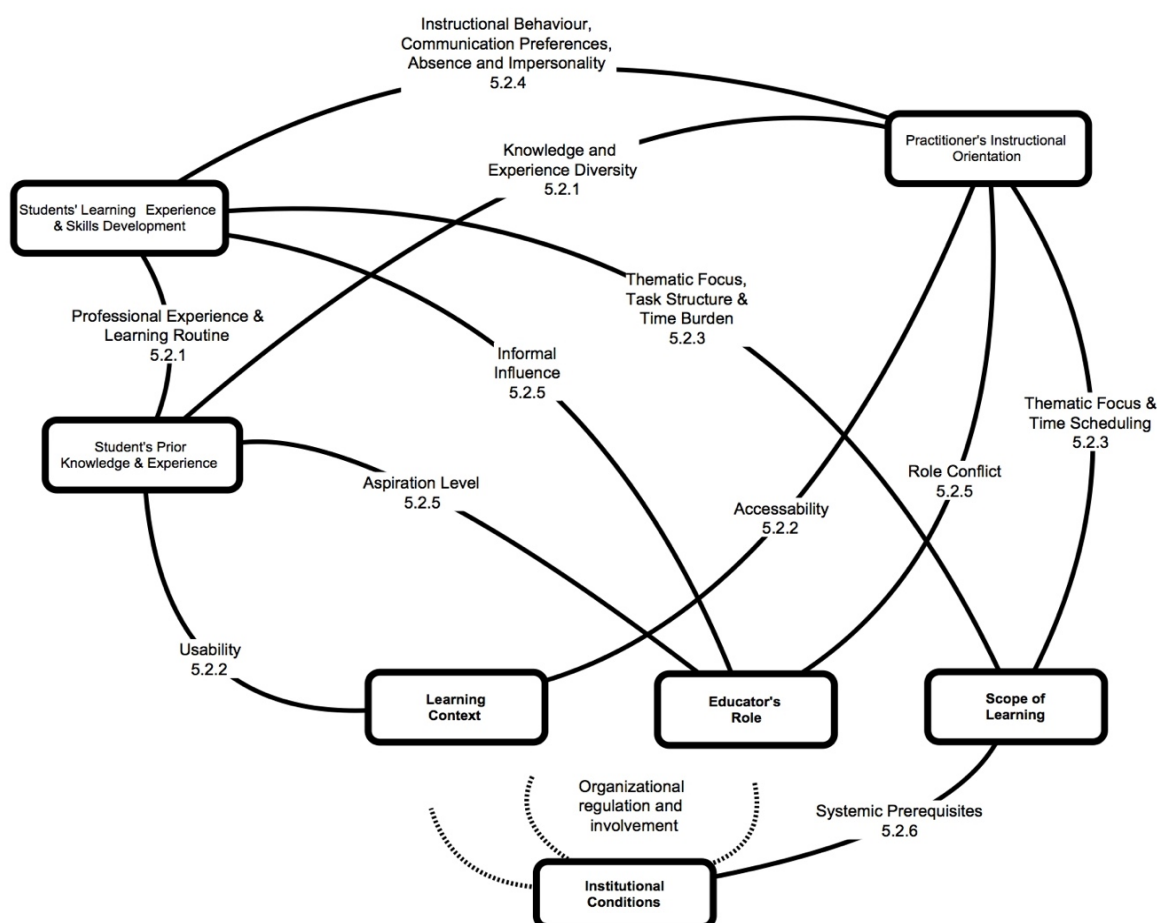
To summarise, the quantitative research outcomes revealed considerable differences concerning practitioners' instructional orientation. Furthermore, students evaluated the effectiveness of their interaction with the practitioners as generally low and their experience as somewhat or mostly negative. The reasons for these outcomes are multifaceted and complex. They encompass various factors arising from students' prior knowledge and experience, the learning context and the scope of learning, practitioners' instructional orientation and educators' roles. In terms of the institutional context, the lack of prior regulation and communication with students and the missing involvement of organisational members has led to information vacuums and reactive remediation. In addition, the missing system prerequisites caused reactive and cumbersome workarounds for systems administrators and administrative staff as well as external practitioners' unsatisfactory participation. In order to address the complexity and dynamics between these various factors, their interrelations are discussed in the next chapter.

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## **6 Conclusions**

As explained by Richardson (2011), system thinking approaches are applied for testing and refining explanations on systems and “to guide policy and decision making” (p. 241). In this section, I will interconnect the categories’ relations, which emerged from the central categories and their dimensions and properties in the previous chapter. Thereto, I provide an integrative story (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in order to discuss the research questions and provide answers to them. As already discussed in Section 4.2, the interrelations as presented did not emerge from a case-replication method as proposed by Yin (2009) and Eisenhardt (1989), but derive from patterns on aggregated data from all cases and their interpretations in the previous chapter that may be similar to other cases studied or that might be studied in similar contexts.

In order to build a robust overarching theoretical framework, such a scheme must be validated in terms of its logic and consistency by comparing it against the raw data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To do so in my study, I verified whether the mapped interrelation appeared in several cases and was experienced and reported by several different participants, namely by students, practitioners, educators and/or administrators. In this case, I considered an interrelation as theoretically relevant and proceeded with my analysis by constructing explanations for their connections. Thereby, I followed an explanation building approach (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009), illustrating the conditional context and explaining how and why things happened. As additionally proposed by Yin (2009), I include theoretical propositions from previous research in order to compare them with my own findings and conclusions. The numbers indicate in which section the categories were discussed:

**Figure 16: Integrative Diagram**

To start my discussion of the research questions, I would like to return to their definitions as presented in Chapter 3. As stated, the central research question relates to the pedagogic core process, focussing on three major aspects, namely: practitioners' effective forms of engagement; business students' practical management skills development; as well as experiential online learning as the objects of research. The related sub-question, which can only be answered based on the outcomes of the central research question, extends the research scope to practical aspects at institutional level: specifically, how practitioners' involvement should be evaluated in a formally-assessed business learning model. However, as revealed in the prior discussion of findings, the central research question itself, actually focussing on the pedagogic core process and environment, can only be discussed in terms of its interrelations to the institutional environment.

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## **6.1 Practitioners' Instructional Orientation and Methods**

Within this case study, the practitioners' role has not been defined beforehand. Even though they were informed about the objectives of their involvement, namely about their potential contributive role regarding business students' practical management skills development, while the application of a clear role concept was also not intended. As this study revealed, the consequences of this vacuum in relation to role and responsibilities were manifold.

As a major outcome, practitioners' instructional self-conception varied greatly (see Section 5.1.2) and practitioners' instructional roles and behaviour were influenced mainly by their own assumptions and convictions as practitioner-instructors, ranging from an authentic managerial attitude to quasi-educator behaviour (Section 5.2.4). Furthermore, the ability to lead a quality instructional discussion turned out to be a major challenge and their instructional behaviour and communication style were influenced to a large degree by their personal preferences (Section 5.2.4).

This study revealed the consequences of a non-alignment of the practitioner's role with the learning task (Section 5.2.3): while some practitioners focused their feedback on the first part of the discussion, where rather theoretical knowledge of the cognitive level "Understand" was emphasised, others concentrated on the discussion of students' practical solutions, which is assigned to the cognitive level "Create" (Krathwohl, 2002).

Furthermore, the lack of harmonisation of the online unit with educators' instructional activities in the traditional classroom (Section 5.2.5) provoked conflict with practitioner behaviour and action (Section 5.2.5). The second point also encompasses the missing assurance of previous learning in terms of the theoretical knowledge needed as a critical entry requirement (Section 5.2.1) in order to successfully undertake the embedded online learning unit. The dynamic that the aspiration level was interpreted differently by the educators (Section 5.2.3) was reinforced by the fact that students' prior knowledge diverged (Section 5.2.1) due to their heterogeneous professional experience.

To conclude, in order to effectively involve practitioners and to successfully institutionalise practitioner-involvement in formally assessed higher business education, this study suggests a pedagogic framework that defines objectives concerning the practitioner's instructional orientation, while adapting the practitioner's instructional self-conception within an overarching role model making the latter aware of their potential and possibilities in terms of the impact on students' learning. This also includes guidance regarding instructional methods within the online environment that ensures effectiveness and quality in instructional discussions and promotes an authentic and conscious lead in their instructional role as facilitator.

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## **6.2 Student Learning Experience and Skills Development**

The participating student cohorts generally evaluated the effectiveness of their interaction with the practitioners as low. At the same time, the degree of learner autonomy was appraised negatively by the majority of the students. Overall, half of the students experienced their virtual discussion involving a practitioner as somewhat or mostly negative (see Sections 5.1.3, 5.1.4 and 5.1.5).

However, one third of the students, who showed prior professional experience in the relevant field of marketing, sales and communication (Section 5.1.1), were generally more positive about practitioners' impact on their learning experience (2.66 on a four-point Likert scale) compared with non-experienced students (2.09) (Section 5.2.1). They achieved a significantly higher sense of learner-centredness, agency, belongingness and competence (Carver et al., 2007) in contrast to pre-experience learners (Section 5.2.1).

This result interrelates with other aspects examined in this study. As stated, students with prior professional experience and current professional status (Section 5.1.1) also have better access to practical contexts (Section 5.2.2), gain a higher degree of practical usability (Section 5.2.2) and thus are more likely to have an effective, efficient and satisfactory learning experience.

On the other hand, for students with no previous professional experience, knowledge principally taught in the traditional classroom played the crucial role (Section 5.2.5)



for achieving the intended learning outcomes online (Section 5.2.3). Particularly for students without prior experience, awareness about the practical relevance of the knowledge and skills and the pedagogical concept's ability to promote meaningful learning may have been a crucial aspect (Section 5.2.1) in terms of their learning autonomy.

To conclude, in order to effectively involve practitioners and to successfully institutionalise practitioner-involvement in formally-assessed higher business education, this study suggests a pedagogic framework that

- I. is harmonized with I.a) the practical problem's intended level of learning outcomes and activities and, in hybrid learning activities, I.b) is aligned with educators' instructional activities and students' learning in and around the traditional classroom while I.c) ensuring that the critical pre-knowledge required by students to autonomously and successfully interact with the practitioner in the given context and task setting is acquired;
- II. is able to adapt to the diversity of students' pre-knowledge, prior experience and competence level to ensure learning effectiveness and usability of knowledge in terms of the learning context, goals and activities.

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### **6.3 Learning Environment and Organisation Conditions**

The study demonstrated that the limited possibilities to extend the thematic focus reduced motivation for an active engagement of both practitioners and students (Section 5.2.3). In addition, the high task fragmentation led to student confusion and demotivation, and resulted in non-stringent practical problem solutions (Section 5.2.3). Furthermore, time constraints complicated and thus limited practitioners' possibilities to participate actively (Section 5.2.3).

In terms of organisational implementation, the study showed the importance of prior regulation and communication with students and underlined the crucial role of organisational members thereby cultivating proactive and circumspect planning and implementation (Section 5.2.6). In addition, the study illustrated the importance of the

functionality of the online learning environment in order to avoid cumbersome workarounds and dissatisfied participants (Section 5.2.6).

To conclude, in order to effectively involve practitioners and to successfully institutionalise practitioner-involvement in formally-assessed higher business education, this study suggests a pedagogic framework that

- I. provides a learning context and environment that promotes the self-regulated and active engagement of all participants. This also includes practical problems and task structures which address students' level of disciplinary competence and learning autonomy;
- II. the definition of institutional standards, systemic and processual adaptations and careful integration measures in terms of practitioners' role in educational core processes. This also demands effortful communication and coordination measures in order to avoid role conflicts and confusion among participants thereby sustaining practitioner engagement within a formal business learning environment.

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## **6.4 Impact of the Practitioner Research**

With my thesis, I provide a piece of research in a field which has not been theoretically or practically researched in any extensive fashion. The findings of my research propose suggest ways for practical implementation and development as well as further research. In this chapter, I will illustrate the practical and theoretical implications of practitioner involvement in experiential online learning.

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### **6.4.1 Contribution to Theory**

The findings of this research reveal some consistencies with prior research on connectivist learning approaches (Downes, 2007) and some important new insights regarding its challenges and potential in the context of formally-assessed learning. In the context of practitioner-involvement in real-world learning contexts, this study reveals the current limitations of experiential learning theory (Carver et al., 2007;

Kolb, 2015; Steinaker & Bell, 1979) and suggests a more comprehensive framework, which could contribute to further practical research.

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#### **6.4.1.1 Connectivist Learning Approaches**

Connectivist theory (Downes, 2007) seemed to be very promising in terms of creating co-productive business learning environments which involve academics, practitioners and students. The potential for increasing business education's range to assimilate relevant business knowledge by involving the knowledge holders from outside academia is obvious, as learners have the opportunity to retain access to a knowledge network where they are able to gain relevant business knowledge. Moreover, they also have the opportunity to autonomously and responsibly develop management skills regarding overall business competence by their application of these skills in a variety of environmental contexts. However, the findings of this research revealed several points of value which demonstrate connectivism's limitations and challenges within a formally-assessed and hybrid learning environment.

Consistent with prior research, this study revealed that connectivism's major beneficial opportunity, namely the possibilities to individualise students' activities relative to their own learning goals (Hollands & Tirthali, 2014) and based on their individual pre-conditional knowledge, skills and interests (Clarke, 2013), may promote effective learning opportunities for business students.

However, the findings of this research also provide evidence that hybrid or embedded designs, where traditional classroom learning is linked to such activities outside the educator's scope of action, provoke role conflicts between educators and practitioners. This study therefore supports prior research's criticism that the numerous connections and activities which are intended within connectivist learning networks demand a high coordinative-instructional presence in order to avoid confusion and inefficient learning (Anderson & Dron, 2011). Furthermore, and as further revealed in this research, numerous top-down, bottom-up, one-to-many or many-to-many relations (Kop, 2011) would most probably make it a very challenging undertaking to ensure an effective instructional role and behaviour, providing a clear,

in-depth, goal-oriented, thus motivating and sustaining practitioner-student interaction.

Moreover, this study is consistent with prior research where heterogenic knowledge, experiential basis, differing learning needs and student motivation (Milligan et al., 2013) complicate formally-assessed learning: as identified in this study, experiential and knowledge diversity in the student cohort turned out to be a complicating factor for effective practitioner-student interaction, which was amplified by practitioners' lack of familiarity with students in respect of their prior knowledge, individual backgrounds and behaviour. This study further revealed that an uncoordinated learning process – as proposed by connectivist approaches – may lead to learning outside the experiential and theoretical scope of participants and/or a lack of applicability to the student's own professional context, particularly for students with less professional experience in the field of studies and a weak theoretical background.

This study therefore suggests an integration and implementation of a connectivist approach (Downes, 2007) within a formally-assessed environment in order to facilitate student-practitioner interaction as an approach. This approach is, first, not directly connected to the traditional classroom and therefore does not need further communication and coordination measures; and, second, should address advanced learners with a solid experiential and knowledge basis. Such a pedagogic approach might be highly effective and reflects connectivism's core assumptions, since it has been developed from a "transmissive" approach (Bates, 2014b, n.p.) to a process where advanced students are able to construct their personal learning network and set their own particular goals and the processes whereby they achieve these (Hollands and Tirthali, 2014), while students' learning is based on more mature individual skills and knowledge (Clarke, 2013).

At this higher level, it is suggested that the possibility to build individual connections and different forms of information flow (Kop, 2011) reflects students' differentiated interests and varied professional backgrounds (Clarke, 2013). In addition, within these stages, the absence of formal teaching strategies and facilitators (Kop, 2011), as widely adopted by connectivist approaches, aligns with students' higher degrees

of autonomy and responsibility. In line with earlier theory, practitioners may take a coordinative role and interconnect students' personal and self-contextualised learning, promoting their communication and interconnection with experts within their own professional network (Skrypnyk et al., 2015), while newly developed learning opportunities and/or emerging challenges are flexibly adapted and corresponding knowledge is dynamically produced (Dron, 2011).

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#### **6.4.1.2 Experiential Learning Theory**

Even though experiential learning (Kolb, 2015; Steinaker & Bell, 1979) is a well-established theory in business education, it is most often practically implemented and researched in and around traditional classrooms, while the potential and challenges of technologically-enhanced as well as real-world embedded frameworks in and around professionals' authentic environments still need to be explored. Regarding the extension of the experiential learning space towards practitioners' authentic business environments and their involvement in formally-assessed learning, this research enhances understanding of practical potential and challenges and also revealed numerous theoretical implications.

As the conclusions of this study reveal, an integrative pedagogic framework needs to address conceptual requirements on several levels to promote effective involvement of practitioners as facilitators: the practitioner's instructional orientation, a harmonisation with pre- and post-activities in the traditional classroom, the diversity of students' pre-knowledge, prior experience and level of competence, and a level-conforming learning context and environment that fosters autonomous learning activities. This means that the framework needs to illustrate practitioners' self-conceptions aligned with students' increasing taxonomic aspiration level in such a way that all the relevant participants, educators, students and practitioners can plan and conduct their interaction while sharing a common understanding of crucial prerequisites, expected behavioural aspects, intended outcomes and the activities leading to them.

However, as this study shows, the range of existing theory and practical concepts is limited. While all of the concepts reviewed (Carver et al., 2007; Kolb, 2015; Steinaker

& Bell, 1979) provide instructional orientation for facilitators, the processual and contextual dimensions are either limited to specific forms of online learning (Carver et al., 2007) or traditional classrooms (Steinaker a& Bell, 1979). Only Kolb's (2015) well-established experiential learning framework covers an instructional, processual and contextual dimension. However, the contextual dimension is not oriented to managerial practice and therefore not self-explanatory for business administration processes.

As revealed in this study, the processual and contextual dimensions which link and align learning and instructional activities to business-managerial problem-solving and decision-making processes and their contexts may be crucial for several reasons: first, in order to authentically integrate practical business processes and real-world problems (e.g. developing a marketing strategy based on a real-world context, as conducted in this study), and second, since student-practitioner online interaction may be embedded within a course that includes traditional classroom learning. Therefore, the processual design needs to allow a coordination between educator and practitioner and a clear alignment of the instructional activities and behaviour.

As the research here revealed, students with no prior exposure to professional practice or who lacked a theoretical background had different assumptions and divergent potential to draw positive effects from their interaction with the practical experts. The knowledge diversity issue as described demands flexibility to adapt to the diversity of students' pre-knowledge and prior experience. However, it is also the case that experiential learning theory does not provide effective concepts to map students' knowledge, skill and competence levels: while Steinaker and Bell's (1979) taxonomy is highly operationalised and closely linked to the instructional orientation as already described in this section, it is not easy for participants to apply in terms of mapping learners' competences if they are not familiar with the taxonomy. Furthermore, Steinaker and Bell's taxonomy is rather focused on short-term learning sequences rather than comprehensive areas of professional knowledge, skills and competence development.

Boyatzis and Kolb's (1995) Learning Skills Profile also provides an encompassing assessment tool based on experiential learning theory, one which is focused on learning activities and styles. However, in the context of business education, real-world contexts and activities are rich in domain knowledge (e.g. strategic marketing) and disciplinary skills (e.g. marketing situation analysis). Even though Boyatzis and Kolb's framework might be valuable for the performance evaluation of transdisciplinary and interpersonal skills, in terms of practical domains and disciplines its possible applications are limited.

This is where lifelong learning concepts which have been introduced during the European higher education harmonization process (Bologna Process) – such as the European Qualification Framework (EQF) (European Union, 2008a) – have their strengths: for instance, the EQF's comprehensive set of descriptors linked to the relevant learning outcomes provides an overarching framework focusing on learners' qualifications in a lifelong learning context. This means that, compared to Steinaker and Bell's (1979) taxonomy or Boyatzis and Kolb's (1995) framework, the EQF is able to capture levels of skills across domains and disciplines within a long-term perspective.

To summarise, this study suggests an integrated experiential learning framework and which encompasses and links instructional, processual, competence and contextual dimensions. As discussed in this study, existing experiential learning approaches only partially cover these dimensions and are focused on the process of learning in the context of traditional classrooms and online learning spaces rather than real-world contexts. Therefore, in order to extend business education's learning arena towards practitioners' authentic business environments, experiential learning frameworks need to extend their theoretical and practical focus.

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#### **6.4.2 Contribution to Practice**

The findings of this study provide valuable practical insights regarding practitioner-involvement in higher business education. In this section, I would like to illustrate the potential of my research findings addressing business schools and educators as well as important aspects of institutional change identified in this study.

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#### **6.4.2.1 Higher Business Education**

As initially stated, an involvement of business practitioners as valuable holders and providers of practical business knowledge in a business learning context should be considered. However, the responsible involvement of practitioners in formal business learning, teaching and assessment has only been researched marginally and is therefore conceptually at an early stage. The findings of this research provide numerous points of value for practical implementation and further research.

The findings of this research provided evidence that practitioners' involvement may contribute to business students' development of practical competence. The research demonstrated that students with prior professional experience in the field of studies achieved a significantly higher sense of learner-centredness, agency, belongingness and competence (Carver et al., 2007) compared to pre-experience learners. Consistent with prior research (Martyn et al., 2007; Westera, 2011), this study showed that learning outside the experiential and theoretical scope of participants and the lack of applicability hampers students' motivated, effective and satisfactory involvement in collaborative learning. The research also revealed that the limited possibilities to extend the thematic focus reduced motivation regarding the active engagement of both practitioners and students and that a high fragmentation of the task led to student confusion and demotivation.

In the context of business education, this study therefore suggests that practitioner-involvement in experiential online learning may be particularly effective either in post-experience business education, such as the traditional generalist MBA, or in advanced or postgraduate disciplinary programmes. Referring to Steinaker and Bell (1979), from the later "Internalization" stage onwards, where students have already demonstrated reflective behaviour and their understanding of their role has manifested itself intrinsically, students start to extend their skills by contextualising and applying in relation to their own professional environment and have successfully acquired the ability to autonomously transfer their skills into practice, building their own practical tools, and are ready to disseminate knowledge and experience.



Furthermore, as previously discussed, academic's self-conception and its role in relation to business and management practice is criticized. At the same time, the potential of academic-practitioner dialogue as the basis for practically relevant research and co-productive relationships as well as the importance for higher education to manage them is underlined.

Even though all selected educators in this study show a professional background in the field of marketing, sales or communications, this thesis demonstrated that practitioners' involvement embedded in a hybrid course design generated a role conflict in relation to educators' responsible role in and around the classroom. Regarding practitioners' self-conception in the context of collaborative relationships in teaching and learning, this study revealed that practitioners' motivations and reasons for participation were a major influence on their self-conception, while their role and behaviour was influenced mainly by their own assumptions and convictions, which varied from an authentic managerial attitude to a quasi-educator tenor.

However, even though this study provided some valuable insights regarding collaborative academic-practitioner relationships in teaching and learning, it is important to point out that the research site's institutional 'tribes' are more vocational than academic and the business school mainly provides dual-track programs with a labour market focus. In terms of practitioners' involvement in collaborative relationships in teaching and learning, I would therefore suggest to conduct further research in more traditional academic environments, which are usually more research-driven.

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#### **6.4.2.2 Institutional Change**

The successful implementation and sustainability of innovative change in higher education institutional contexts is challenging while barriers on different levels have to be overcome. As demonstrated in this study, the lack of prior institutional regulation and communication measures aimed at students and the lack of involvement of organisational members has led to information vacuums and thus to lack of interest and students and programme managers' commitment (Verhulst & Lambrechts, 2015). Furthermore, the missing processual standards as well as

technological system prerequisites for efficiently implementing practitioners' instructional role caused technical problems and thus workarounds for systems administrators and administrative staff and, furthermore, encouraged reactive remediation instead of proactive planning and implementation. However, as stated earlier, due to ethical considerations and the limited range of the research project, aspects of organisational change and change management have not been focused on in this research.

In the context of external practitioner-involvement in institutional formally-assessed learning, this study revealed important insights which may be relevant for future research and its practical implementation: it needs to be considered that external participants may be on-boarded to an existing organisation that may significantly vary in terms of culture regarding its organisational values and culture. As this study revealed, practitioners with a business-managerial perspective show different behavioural patterns when interacting with students and other participants than educators. What is part of the authentic student experience may cause irritation and communication issues, as shown in this research. This is particularly the case because practitioners are located outside the institution and are only situatively and virtually connected with the business school. This also means that, depending on their status in respect to the organisation, they may not be susceptible to further organisational integration and subordination, which may also cause communication issues and challenges regarding quality management within the educational core processes.

As further revealed in this study, the practitioners reflect practical experts with divergent perspectives on what 'valid' knowledge is, following different knowledge paradigms (Moses and Knutsen, 2007) where knowledge often is produced and approved based on practical experience rather than by rigorous research methods. This study supports what has already been expressed by Kelliher et al. (2010, p. 118), who state:

“[i]ntroducing business leaders as ‘sole’ educators also present a risk of orienting the educational system too much towards practical utility rather

than pure knowledge (Clinebell & Clinebell, 2008; Starkey & Tempest, 2005), as there may be issues of attribution and confirmatory biases when describing context-specific experiences”.

Thus, practitioners’ involvement as facilitators may evoke threats, particularly for senior academic participants (Dasborough, Lamb, & Suseno, 2015), which need to be carefully dealt with.

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### **6.5 Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

The major limitation relates to the fact that this case study examined only one form of student-practitioner interaction in a single institutional context and in only one field of study, namely marketing. Therefore, it was conducted in an embedded single-case study (Yin, 2009). Thus, generalisability of the research outcomes is limited due to the lack of comparability with other forms of student-practitioner collaboration in various fields of study and different institutional contexts. Furthermore, this unique case involved post-experience Swiss part-time undergraduate business students with a vocational educational background in a blended format of training, which limits comparability and applicability to traditional pre-experience undergraduates in face-to-face programmes.

Futhermore, as already discussed, the underlying instructional design upon this case study was conducted limited the creative frame. Some improvements on the pedagogical design and on the inclusion of technology such as synchronous communication platforms as well as varied and extended forms of online collaboration would probably have increased the engagement of students in the study. But for reasons already stated, the pedagogic design was imposed by the existing and the instructional design for this case study had to be narrowed to existing forms according to the school’s regulations, rigorously following the formal assessment regulation of the research site. However, even though the field of technology-mediated learning designs was not the focus of this particular research future research should be done on this direction.

On the other hand, this single case study created the opportunity to fit the research design with the specific given institutional context and align it to the objected

research outcomes (Mariotto, 2014). Furthermore, the unique opportunity to promote practitioner-student collaboration within a classroom-related model in a part-time undergraduate program involving mainly post-experience students opens up various routes for business educators to gain insights and understanding of challenges that arose from this particular research context. Most importantly, business educators shall derive comparative conclusions which may inform his/her own professional practice (May, 2011).

Also, the following limitations need to be pointed out: the case study

- I. examined one instructional design, where students provided their own practical challenges in their own professional context and practitioners interacted with them on an improvisational basis. This limits the generalisability of the research outcomes due to the missing comparability with other forms of student-practitioner interaction and in other learning contexts as well as given the lack of a structured teaching design. However, similarities with other future cases may be found with this study while simultaneously adding new findings to the existing knowledge on the topic:
- II. included participants with a vocational educational background with most of the students exhibiting professional experience undertaking a part-time programme. This limits the applicability of the research outcomes to an international education context and probably to other higher education institutions with primarily pre-experience students and/or post-experience executive education programmes;
- III. could not provide enough data from the student survey regarding practitioners' instructional behaviour from each of the conducted cases. Thus, data could only be aggregated over all cases and could therefore not be compared with my own analysis of the instructional interactions for each case based on the transcripts. As a consequence, an evaluation of which instructional behaviour in relation to which practitioner was most effective could not be examined in depth;

- IV. examined a limited set of intended learning outcomes in the field of marketing and the interactional phase only took place over a period of two weeks. Comparable data encompassing other fields of business and management, while varied student learning outcomes, outcomes categories and forms of interaction over a longer (or shorter) time period could not be analysed.

However, the following aspects are supportive in terms of constructing validity, external validity and reliability (Gray, 2014; Mariotto et al., 2014; Yin, 2009):

- I. Multiple sources of evidence have been used (Student Online, Survey, Interviews, Interaction Analysis, see Section 4.3.3), including evidence from various perspectives (Students, Practitioners, Educators, see Section 4.3.2), thus, triangulation sustains the validity of my research outcomes;
- II. In order to address the broadly defined central research question and the associated sub-question at an institutional level, quantitative data regarding the pedagogic core process (Student Presage Factors, Instructional Approaches, Student Learning Experience, Student Learning Outcomes, see Section 5.1) have been integrated into a sequential explanatory design (Ivankova et al., n.d.);
- III. Data collection and analysis was systematic and it was also integrated into an “organized and structured” three-level framework (Scholz & Tietje, 2002, p. 30), where the case study was further structured in an institutional framework that informed the data collection framework (see Section 4.2.3);
- IV. Within the framework’s synthetical-analytical level, data was organised using an integrative diagram as a vehicle (see Chapter 6) in order to identify central categories and their interrelations (Corbin and Strauss, 2008);
- V. Thereby, in order to establish a “chain of evidence”, “thick description” and “triangulation” (Yin, 2009) have been used to illustrate participants’ different perspectives by means of integrating verbatim quotes and quantitative data;

- VI. Furthermore, the preliminary case study report, which was also presented in a condensed form to the doctoral community drawn from the University of Liverpool's EdD cohort, was subsequently reviewed by and discussed with the involved institutional administrators;;
- VII. In order to identify causal relations and their conditions, explanation building (Gray, 2014; Yin, 2009) has been conducted (see Section 5.2) and illustrated here using an integrative diagram (see Chapter 6), where the consistency of the findings and explanations of their connections were iteratively constructed and compared against the raw data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008);
- VIII. Based on a "soft system thinking approach" (Jackson, 2000), the findings have been discussed in order to provide the integrative story (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and to establish requirements for effective practitioner involvement within a formal higher business education context, which were then presented and illustrated in an integrative framework (see Section 5.2 and Chapter 6).
- IX. In order to demonstrate applicability and transferability to other higher business education environments, the institutional context (Institutional Policy and Culture, Conceptions of Teaching, Curriculum Design and Intended Formal Qualification, see Section 4.2.1) has been illustrated in order to inform the reader about the particular environmental and institutional conditions under which the case was conducted and the findings have been generated (Mariotto et al., 2014);
- X. Furthermore, the research findings, theoretical explanations and recommendations have been reflected on and discussed against prior theoretical findings and practical concepts during the entire process of data analysis and explanation building (see Sections 5.1, 5.2 and Chapter 6);
- XI. The data collection framework and procedures have been transparently demonstrated (see Sections 4.2.3 and 4.3.3) and exemplarily illustrated in the Appendix.

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## **6.6 Recommendations**

In this section, I present my recommendations for future research and professional practice. As initially stated, these recommendations do not focus primarily on the research site as an organisation but on business schools with a focus on practice-oriented higher education in general.

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### **6.6.1 Recommendations for Future Research**

As for my recommendations for future research, I would like to refer back to the limitations of my case study and provide suggestions as to how to address them in subsequent studies. Further research may focus on and encompass:

- I. the learning space and connected systemic aspects;
- II. various instructional designs and/or roles in different professional and blended or online contexts. This encompasses, for example, practitioners' professional contexts and business environments as a basis for student learning and interaction where – referring to the integrative framework – practitioners conduct different roles in relation to the student's route to skill advancement;
- III. further case studies, based on my research design, tools and instruments, conducted as single-case studies to gain comparable data and/or in multiple-case design (Yin, 2009), developing further research tools and instruments to promote research in the field of practitioner involvement in higher (business) education;
- IV. studies with pre-experience students (traditional full-time bachelors and consecutive full-time masters) or post-experience and executive students as participants. Reflecting on my own research outcomes, the latter advanced students I consider as having particular potential for effective student learning from practitioner involvement;
- V. studies gathering comparable data on students and practitioners. In this way, evidence could be provided in terms of which instructional orientation and

behaviour most effectively promotes students' management skills development and to whom;

- VI. examining skills development in other fields of business and management (strategy, entrepreneurship, finance etc.), introducing other forms of interaction, also synchronous, and varied time periods.

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### **6.6.2 Recommendations to the Business Education Community**

In this section, I address the business education community in general and its exponents in international accreditation bodies in particular, such as from the AACSB, EFMD and ACBSP, which have a great influence on the development of business education and its globally recognised standards.

Formal business teaching, learning and assessment – even though its real-world relevance has been critically discussed – has only randomly researched practitioner involvement in its educational core processes. I therefore suggest that such co-productive forms of knowledge creation and skills development should be focused on their valuable initiatives to increase business learning's effectiveness for professional practice. At the same time, academic and professional qualification criteria for business school faculties should be carefully reviewed in order to promote and widen the participation of business leaders and experts in learning, teaching and assessment processes. Even though most of them do not fulfil today's criteria for business schools' core and adjunct faculty, they may contribute positively to business students from their peripheral position and thus – for business students and educators – can contribute authentic, original, credible and therefore legitimate real-world perspectives.

Through the introduction of the European Qualification Framework (European Union, 2008a) and in relation to its adaption and implementation in national qualification frameworks throughout the European higher education area, new concepts and frameworks for the evaluation of qualifications have been provided. These frameworks also encompass practical skills and knowledge and may, therefore,



facilitate building a valuable base for the validation of competences in professional practice and practical learning contexts. Regarding the existing assessment frameworks already implemented in higher business education, these new tools and instruments which promote transparency through their range of competences and descriptors may play an important role in further extending experiential learning contexts in formally-assessed learning, thus widening the institutional range.

However, in the first place, the questions of which knowledge is 'valid' for business education and what is 'valuable' for future business students need to be addressed. As Barnett (2004) has previously underlined, there needs to further discussion regarding the concepts higher education is built on, in particular in business education which aims to provide practically relevant skills and knowledge. As stated earlier, referring to Kelliher et al.'s (2010) insistence that the risk of practitioner involvement may overemphasise knowledge orientation towards "practical utility" instead of "pure knowledge" (p. 118), this illustrates the actual question of whether and how far practitioners are legitimated to contribute and thus to become involved in formally-assessed higher business education.

Thus, I would like to launch the discussion and summarise my recommendations as follows. The business education community should:

- I. examine the potential of practitioner involvement in higher business education in order to reveal their potential as holders of profound experiential knowledge. Thereto, academic and professional criteria need to be reviewed in order to open the way for further practical research;
- II. extend the focus of the educational value chain towards professionals' workplaces and expand their systemic and processual locus of control to professional practice. In this context, recent European initiatives may play a decisive role as conceptual door-openers. These concepts need to be adopted in business school assessment frameworks in order to promote learning in and on practical learning contexts;

- III. lead the discussion on knowledge orientation and the institutional 'idea' in respect to business schools. The question of what 'valid knowledge' is and what is 'valuable' and required for professional practice is, in the end, this study's decisive perspective.

To summarise, this study suggests an overarching pedagogic framework and guidance regarding instructional and learning activities within the online learning environment in order to ensure the instructional effectiveness and quality of practitioner involvement. Furthermore, within formally-assessed higher business education, such involvement needs to be aligned with students' learning in and around traditional classrooms and harmonised with the fluctuating degree of pre-knowledge needed for the addressed level of competence. In order to successfully institutionalise practitioner-involvement, a learning context and environment which promotes the self-regulated and active engagement of all participants is proposed. Thereto, institutional standards as well as systemic and processual adaptations are needed.

This research contributes in the main part to recent theory in the field of connectivism and experiential learning while providing practically valuable insights into aspects of organisational change for higher education institutions and educators who aim to involve practitioners in relevant education programmes.

The major limitation of this study is that it was conducted in an embedded single case study (Yin, 2009). Thus, the generalisability of the research outcomes is limited. However, the research findings and conclusions' validity and reliability are supported through multiple sources of evidence, the inclusion of quantitative and qualitative data and a strong analytical framework and process.

Finally, the study provides numerous recommendations for practical implementation and research for the business education community. Furthermore, it promotes the discussion of practitioner involvement in higher

business education and focuses on the extension of the educational value chain towards professionals' workplaces in a life-long learning context.

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## Appendix

### i. Student Online Survey

The Student Online Survey was published in German. Questions 1-7 included the Information Consent Form as approved by the University of Liverpool Ethics Committee. The following extract is the English translation of the German language original:

#### Student Presage Factors

8. How many years of professional experience do you have (after completion of an apprenticeship, if applicable)?

- ☐ Less than 2 years
- ☐ 2 to 5 years
- ☐ More than 5 years

9. How would you describe your current professional status?

- ☐ Operational function (assistant/case manager)
- ☐ Operational management (team leader, head of department)
- ☐ Functional management (IT manager, HR manager, marketing manager etc.).
- ☐ Strategic management (member of the executive board)

10. What is the highest degree you have achieved before the beginning of your current studies?

- ☐ Federal Diploma of Vocational Education or similar
- ☐ Federal Diploma of Professional Education and Training or similar
- ☐ Advanced Federal Diploma of Professional Education and Training or similar
- ☐ Certificate or Diploma of Advanced Studies (CAS, DAS)
- ☐ Bachelor's Degree (BA, BSc)
- ☐ Master's Degree (MSc, MA, MAS)
- ☐ Doctorate (PhD, DBA)

11. Have you gained specific professional experience in the field of marketing?

- ☐ Yes, I have few years of professional experience in this field
- ☐ Yes, I have several years of qualified functional and/or management experience
- ☐ No, I don't have any or only occasional professional experience in the field of marketing

**Student Learning Experience**

12. As opposed to learning within the traditional classroom, your online learning experience should address your individual professional background, interests, skills and needs. In this way, your practical learning benefit, learning motivation and, thus, learning success should be increased.

Does your learning experience within the just completed virtual discussion match with this goal?

- ☐ Fully agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Partly agree
- ☐ Do not agree

13. As opposed to learning within the traditional classroom, in the virtual learning space, you should be the main actor. This means that you should have the possibility to influence the learning process and/or content.

Does your learning experience within the just-completed virtual discussion match with this goal?

- ☐ Fully agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Partly agree
- ☐ Do not agree

14. As opposed to learning within the traditional classroom, in the virtual learning space, your counterpart is not physically present. This could hamper interaction, motivation or can lead to emotional distance or even irritation.

Does your learning experience within the just-completed virtual discussion match with this goal?

- ☐ Fully agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Partly agree
- ☐ Do not agree

15. Regardless if learning takes place within the traditional or virtual classroom or not, your learning should be focused on new knowledge and skills and its application in practically oriented context. There, you should have the possibility to bring in your own experience and combine it with the new one.

Does your learning experience match with this goal?

- ☐ Fully agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Partly agree
- ☐ Do not agree

16. How did the involvement of the practical expert influence your learning experience regarding Questions 12-15 overall?

- ☐ Mostly positive
- ☐ Rather positive
- ☐ Neither positive nor negative
- ☐ Rather negative
- ☐ Mostly negative

17. Please expand briefly on your answer to Question 16:

### Student Learning Outcomes

18. Please provide your assessment of to what extent the involvement of the practical expert contributed to the achievement of the following competences:

	Involvement was			
	not contri- butive	a little contri- butive	contri- butive	highly contri- butive
You are able to name the categorical structure of the marketing mix with its classic four sub mixes and explain it exemplary;	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You are able to name the three characteristic levels of products (services) and derive the customer benefit therefrom;	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You are able to formulate marketing goals considering the market's circumstances and respective target areas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

19. Further remarks on your response to Question 18:

20. Please provide your assessment of in how far you have reached the following competences after the completion of your classroom learning, self-studies and the just-completed virtual discussion:

	not achieved	partly achieved	largely achieved	fully achieved
You are able to name the categorical structure of the marketing mix with its classic four sub mixes and explain it exemplary;	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You are able to name the three characteristic levels of products (services) and derive the customer benefit therefrom;	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You are able to formulate marketing goals considering the market's circumstances and respective target areas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

21. . Further remarks on your response to Question 20:

22. Please think back on your interaction/discussion with the practitioner. Which of the following statements reflect your learning experience with the practical expert?

	doesn't match	partly matches	largely matches	fully matches
Shared his/her experience with me, helped me to set goals or motivated me to learn more.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provided information, examples, facts or solution processes in terms of a practical concept.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Demonstrated basics, causes or solution principles.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helped me to distinguish between the essential and the nonessential.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provided supportive information/data as part of a practical challenge.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Linked practical aspects to theoretical models.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Induced me to practical or theoretical consolidation by asking questions, giving clues or providing explanations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



	doesn't match	partly matches	largely matches	fully matches
Simulated a practical situation/solution process for me or with me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provided further media/sources or showed me how/where to find them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Analysed or structured information/data.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Selected and shared relevant data/information from professional practice.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evaluated or interpreted information, which has been provided by me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Exchanged views and opinions with me, questioned or clarified them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Applied concepts as a basis for practical reasoning or measures.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Introduced theoretical assumptions for problem resolution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Created possibilities to apply my knowledge/skills in further/different practical situations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reflected/discussed my own learning experience with me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Opened doors through our discussion to demonstrate my newly-acquired skills.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Created opportunities to apply my analytical skills in new/different practical situations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

23. Do you have any final remarks you would like to add at this point?

## ii. Educator and Practitioner Interview Protocol

1.	<p><b>Opening Question(s)</b></p> <p>What is are your general impressions from the practitioner interaction within the virtual classroom?</p> <p><i>Additional Questions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What were the biggest challenges (for the practitioner)?</li> <li>b) What was particularly positive/negative (for students)?</li> </ul>																				
2.	<p><b>Instructional Approaches</b></p> <p>Which parts of the practitioner interaction have you noticed as particularly positive/negative (for students)?</p> <p><i>Additional Questions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Which practitioner contribution/behaviour was particularly purposeful in terms of the achievement of the learning outcomes?</li> <li>b) Which not?</li> </ul>																				
3.	<p><b>Student Learning Experience</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) How/in what ways do you think did practitioner involvement contributed to/improved students' learning success/experience?</li> <li>b) How/in what ways do you think did practitioner involvement strengthened the learner's individual learning?</li> <li>c) How/in what ways do you think the practitioner's presence within the virtual classroom was perceptible for students?</li> <li>d) How do you think the practitioner's involvement increased the practical orientation/relevance of students' learning?</li> </ul>																				
4.	<p><b>Student Learning Outcomes</b></p> <p>a) Please provide your assessment of students' achievement regarding the following competences after the completion of their classroom learning, self-studies and the just-completed virtual discussion:</p> <table border="0"> <thead> <tr> <th></th><th>not achieved</th><th>partly achieved</th><th>largely achieved</th><th>fully achieved</th></tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>You are able to name the categorical structure of the marketing mix with its classic four sub mixes and explain it exemplary;</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr> <td>You are able to name the three characteristic levels of products (services) and derive the customer benefit therefrom;</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> <tr> <td>You are able to formulate marketing goals considering the market's circumstances and respective target areas</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr> </tbody> </table>		not achieved	partly achieved	largely achieved	fully achieved	You are able to name the categorical structure of the marketing mix with its classic four sub mixes and explain it exemplary;	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	You are able to name the three characteristic levels of products (services) and derive the customer benefit therefrom;	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	You are able to formulate marketing goals considering the market's circumstances and respective target areas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	not achieved	partly achieved	largely achieved	fully achieved																	
You are able to name the categorical structure of the marketing mix with its classic four sub mixes and explain it exemplary;	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>																	
You are able to name the three characteristic levels of products (services) and derive the customer benefit therefrom;	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>																	
You are able to formulate marketing goals considering the market's circumstances and respective target areas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>																	

5.	<b>Student Learning Outcomes</b>  b) Please provide your assessment of how and to what extent the involvement (of the practical expert) contributed to the achievement of these competences (or not).
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### iii. Administrator Interview Protocol

1.	<p><b>Opening Question(s)</b></p> <p>What is are your general impressions regarding the practitioner interaction within the virtual classroom?</p> <p><i>Additional Questions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>c) What were the biggest challenges (for the practitioner)?</li> <li>d) What was particularly positive/negative (for students)?</li> </ul>
2.	<p><b>Instructional Approaches, Student Learning Experience and Student Learning Outcomes</b></p> <p>Review and discussion on quantitative research results</p>
3.	<p><b>Reflection upon Practice</b></p> <p>Open discussion on the organisational framework and challenges within the current setting.</p> <p>Discussion points</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Institutional Influence</li> <li>b) Conceptions of Teaching</li> <li>c) Curriculum Design</li> </ul>

#### iv. Ethics Approval



Dear Stefan

I am pleased to inform you that the EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below.

Sub-Committee:	EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC)
Review type:	Expedited
PI:	
School:	Lifelong Learning
Title:	
First Reviewer:	Prof. Morag A. Gray
Second Reviewer:	Dr. Baaska Anderson
Other members of the Committee	Dr. Peter Kahn, Dr. Ian Willis
Date of Approval:	10 <sup>th</sup> September 2014

The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:

##### Conditions

1	Mandatory	M: All serious adverse events must be reported to the VPREC within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the EdD Thesis Primary Supervisor.
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This approval applies for the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Sub-Committee should be notified. If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Sub-Committee by following the Notice of Amendment procedure outlined at <http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc>.

Where your research includes elements that are not conducted in the UK, approval to proceed is further conditional upon a thorough risk assessment of the site and local permission to carry out the research, including, where such a body exists, local research ethics committee approval. No documentation of local permission is required (a) if the researcher will simply be asking organizations to distribute research invitations on the researcher's behalf, or (b) if the researcher is using only public means to identify/contact participants. When medical, educational, or business records are analysed or used to identify potential research participants, the site needs to explicitly approve access to data for research purposes (even if the researcher normally has access to that data to perform his or her job).

Please note that the approval to proceed depends also on research proposal approval.

Kind regards,

Morag Gray

Chair, EdD. VPREC